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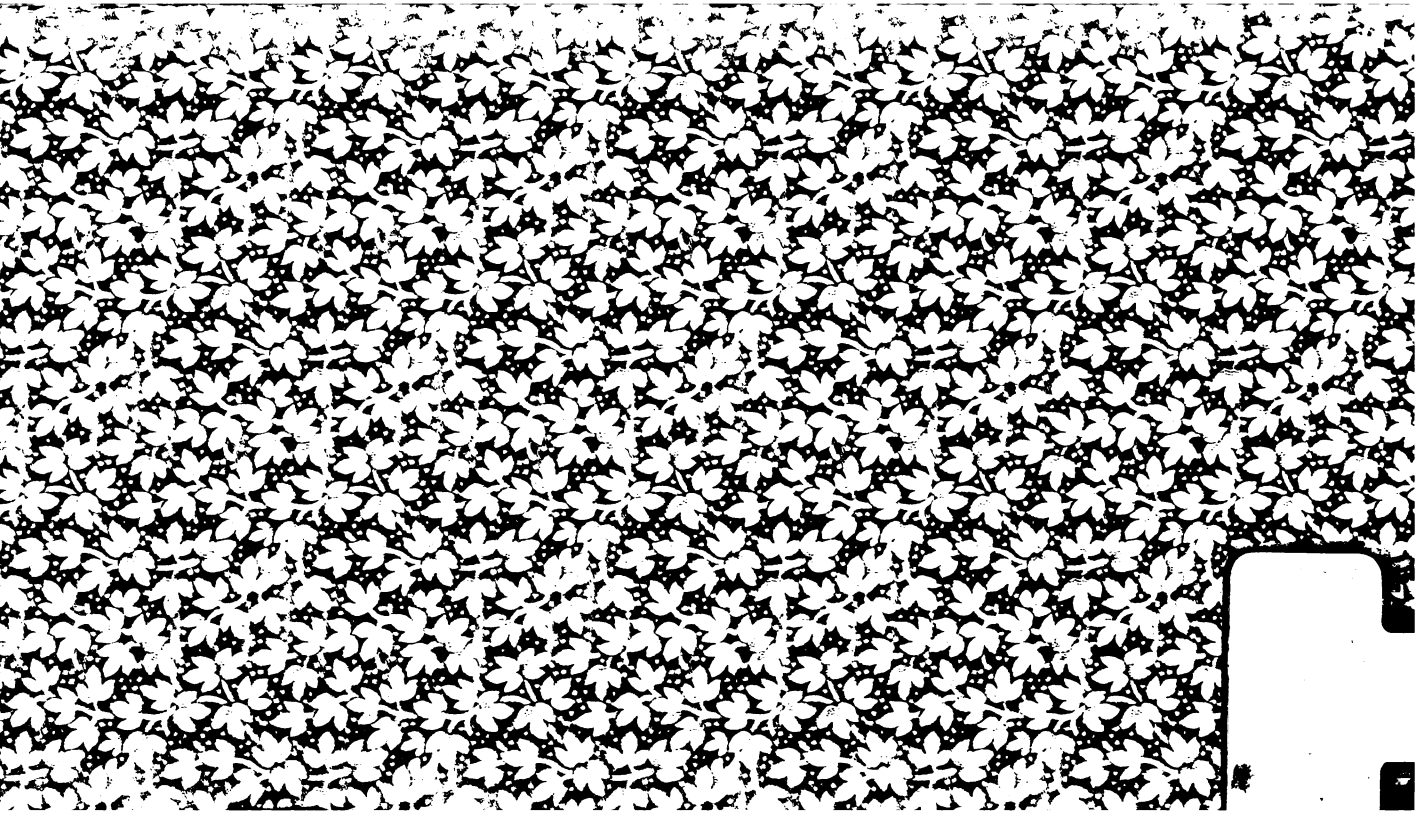
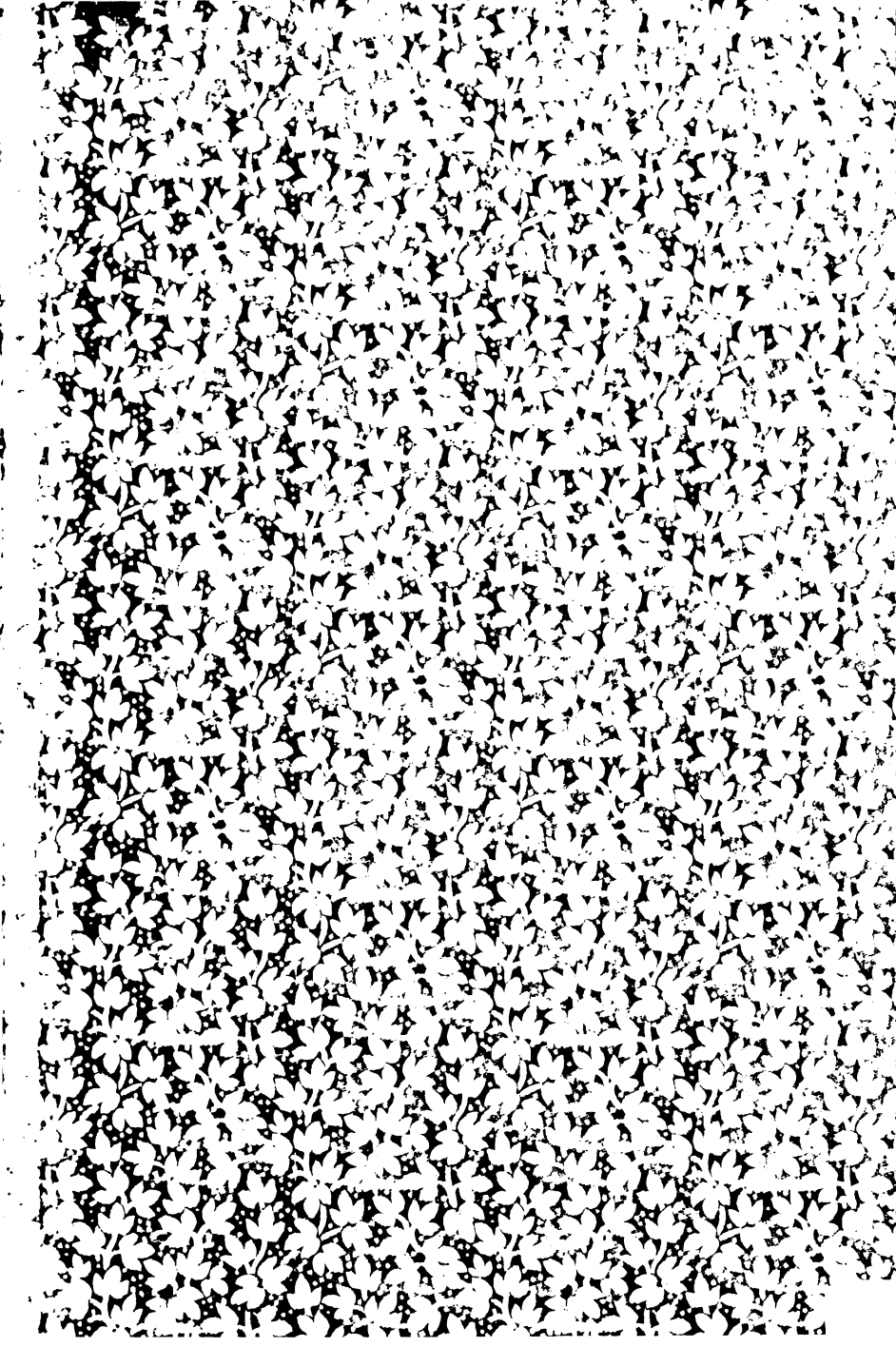
MISS VANDELEUR

BY THE AUTHOR OF

ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE





MISS VANDELEUR;

OR,

ROBBING PETER TO PAY PAUL.

A NOVEL.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

AUTHOR OF 'HIRELL; OR, LOVE BORN OF STRIFE,' 'ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE,' 'ISRAEL MORT, OVERMAN,' 'THE SHERLOCKS,' 'A NOBLE WIFE,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON: F. V. WHITE & CO.,
31 SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1884.

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MISS VANDELEUR.

CHAPTER I.

MISS VANDELEUR'S SONG.

GUALTMORE reached, the troops found the door wide open to receive them, for the comte had sent a swift messenger in advance to inform Lord Harlaxton of their approach to the castle; and to say, how he, the comtesse, and the commander of the troops had taken counsel together; and, he was happy to say, the latter had welcomed the double opportunity of protecting Gualtmore; and having, as he hoped, another brush with the Fenians that might end differently from the last.

Nothing could exceed the satisfaction of Lord Harlaxton to be so relieved of the anxiety he had felt for his mother and Miss Vandeleur, through the excited state of the district around; and on account of the threatened attack by the Fenians, about which he had managed to keep them in ignorance.

Some guests were in the house, who, like the countess and Miss Vandeleur, knew nothing of any special danger. To keep them all still unsuspicious, Lord Harlaxton had made use of the season (just before Christmas) to keep up all possible festivity.

The troops now found themselves the objects of a reception that was likely to be only too hospitable, but for the forethought of the major; who warned all his subordinates to be on their guard, and stop on the instant everything that looked like licence, or unseemly or dangerous indulgence.

When he had, like all good officers, seen to everything with his own eyes, he rejoined the earl; who led the way to the drawing-room, where the major was introduced to the countess, and to

Miss Vandeleur. He presently became the centre of a wide circle, the chief speaker in a sort of all-round conversation, that left the family and the guests deeply interested in the young soldier whose aid had been so timely. As to the major, he became so impressed with the beauty of the two ladies in person, mind, and character, that he hardly knew which he admired most—the age of the one, or the youth of the other.

As the evening drew on, the countess went to the piano, and called on Miss Vandeleur to sing.

This she did with exquisite taste and feeling, and in a sweet, but not powerful voice, that charmed the guests, who, with the major, all pleaded for another song.

Her first had been a ballad,—'The Banks of Allan Water;' and she was again about to stop, in turning over the leaves of her music, at some equally sad strain, but the countess, who watched, said in an undertone to her,—

'We should cheer, not sadden our guests, and for that matter our own hearts too. Sing "Impudent Barney O'Hea."'

Miss Vandeleur paused, seemed to hesitate, as if in difficulty, but turned the leaves once more; and summoning whatever of humorous feeling might remain in her not very happy life of late, was about to comply, when she suddenly burst into tears, and murmured to the countess,—

'Say I am not well,' rose, and hurriedly left the room.

But scarcely had the countess made the best of things, and persuaded one of the guests to take Miss Vandeleur's place, before that lady herself returned, and, with a smile, said aloud,—

'Pray forgive me. I felt suddenly as though I should be ill, but it is quite gone;' and therewith, without even a word of suggestion that would certainly have led the guests to change the song, she sat down at the piano under the tearful but admiring eyes of the countess; and again sang, and delighted all who were present with her refined and instinctive sense of humour, as much as she had done by her pathos a few minutes before.

Dancing succeeded the music, and was

kept up with spirit till the time came for the departure of the troops on their pretended journey.

When the major left the drawing-room with Lord Harlaxton, the latter said,—

'Will you be back in time to continue our dance—that is, supposing you have not another kind of dance—a sword dance to engage in?'

'I wish,' was the reply, 'you would keep it up, if only at intervals, till we come back; as helping, if there are traitors on the watch within or without, to make them sure you can be safely attacked.'

'I understand, and will do it. I have everything ready to arm a dozen of my servants, should you want them.'

'Keep them to guard the ladies and your guests, otherwise my first anxiety must be for them.'

'Thank you; but I have places in which to put them where no immediate harm could reach.'

'That then is a good work accomplished, we'll say. And now, my lord, farewell, for two or three hours only,

Please don't fire upon us when we come stealing in like so many thieves in the night.'

And with that jest, which Lord Harlaxton received with a smile, they parted.

Presently, however, the earl followed, to watch from some point of vantage the major's skilful, and to him somewhat novel, method of marshalling his small army, in view of the necessities of the case.

The infantry were in column in the middle of the road, with the cavalry long drawn out on each side, as if to shield them; but really in order, that when they reached the by-road through which the former were to return, the cavalry should go on slowly to a certain point agreed on; as the place whence, in case of need, they could easily be recalled, but as if the infantry were still marching with them, after they had in reality passed away.

If Fenian scouts were near, they would be obliged to keep a certain distance to prevent themselves from being discovered. That fact, and the darkness, it was thought, would make the ruse successful.

CHAPTER II.

STEPHEN'S MIDNIGHT ADVENTURES.

MEANTIME action, as had so often happened before, was again proving an effectual sedative to Stephen's disturbed thoughts.

Perhaps, too, he saw, with secret satisfaction, that the duties assigned to him presented favourable opportunities for an occasional glance into the interior of Gualtmore, without danger of recognition.

He chose and placed his men, by the aid of the map, without having occasion to make a single inquiry; warning each to whistle only as a first signal to him, reserving fire for those who would not stand and wait till he came.

And then he sought out and found the

best, the shortest, and the most secret paths through the trees, by which to go from one to another of the sentinels at frequent intervals, and from there to the mansion.

That done, he took his post to watch at the back of the mansion, which remained in complete darkness, for the return of the troops.

At some little distance from the doors at which they were to enter stood a group of magnificent cedars; whose lower branches swaying to and fro in the wind, often startled him into the belief he saw the forms of his comrades emerging from the obscurity.

And when at dead of night they did arrive, their advance was so noiseless, their march so like a march of ghosts bent on some supernatural errand, their disappearance in single file through the gloom of the open door as into a tomb so impressive, that Stephen could hardly satisfy himself to take the fact on trust that they were his comrades, and not the very enemies whose presence was so expected and provided for.

But absolute silence had been enjoined.

He could therefore only wait and watch. It was quite a relief when the man who was the last to enter, spoke to one in advance, saying,—

'Well done!' and knew the voice to be the major's.

After paying visits to his three men and finding all well, the sounds of music drew Stephen towards the mansion, and to one of the windows of a long room on the ground floor, brilliantly lighted by chandeliers.

He found as he expected, dancing going on; and his heart began to beat as he saw a pair advancing towards—and then passing the window, where he was, and he fancied the lady to be Miss Vandeleur.

That was a mistake. He waited some time thinking she must come. But still he saw nothing of her. And that small fact served him for large inferences. She was not inclined to dance. She was, perhaps, still thinking how often she had danced with him. She was sad; she still cared for, still thought of him, and him only in full forgiveness.

A whistle cut short his reveries. He hurried to the sentinel who had signalled

to him, and who said he had heard some rustling among the adjacent trees, and believed a man had passed into the wood. Either he did not hear or would not acknowledge his challenge, and was gone before the sentry could make up his mind to fire, thinking he might be one of the earl's gamekeepers.

Stephen made him point out the place from whence the sounds had seemed to issue; and thither he went alone, moving with stealthy step, his bayonet and rifle in position ready, from one sheltering tree trunk to another; and at last saw something that brought him to a stop, just as he was about to emerge on a little open place that had been cleared to get room and daylight by the woodcutters. What was the something? At one moment it looked like a rude pillar. The next he fancied it the trunk of a broken tree. But in an instant more he decided it was a man, pausing as if in doubt what next to do, and unable to decide.

'Stand!' cried Stephen in a stern voice; and he advanced with levelled bayonet towards the figure.

Suddenly he saw a movement as of an arm, holding no doubt a revolver, and quick as lightning he leapt forward and plunged his bayonet into the object before him.

What was his wonder and annoyance to find by the shock he himself received (enough to have broken his weapon), the nature of his antagonist. It was a withered tree, of which only a single branch remained, and was blown occasionally to and fro by the wind; and this in the darkness and mystery of night was converted by Stephen's imagination into the arm of a Fenian lifted to destroy him.

With a laugh that was not the least mirthful, and something like an angry oath, following, he called himself an egregious ass; and was thankful he had not been tempted to fire, and so brought the sentinels to his aid in such an extremity.

At that very moment, when his heart seemed burning within him for something to do that might make him forget this ridiculous blunder, he, too, heard the sound of rustling near him, of which the sentinel had spoken.

'Now I shall, if I don't mind, commit

the opposite and worse folly, and fail to act when action may be a matter of life and death. Still I must take my chance, —so here goes!'

Going to the sentry, whose whistle had warned him, he bade him follow, and walk where he moved, and as noiselessly as possible.

Listening with bended head, he could hear the faintest possible sound of rustling leaves, as if under some one's feet.

Following the direction of the sound, and warned by that of his own and his comrade's danger from the leaves, he trod with careful step where he fancied there would be fewest, about the elevated roots of the trees. The private did the same, and both succeeded in moving silently along till they were on the edge of the by-road, along which the returning soldiery had come. This road continued past the mansion, and presently joined a high road about a hundred yards or so away.

There they became aware of the sound of wheels coming from the same quarter as the returning soldiery, and they advanced into the road to see who was passing.

A car drove up, in which Stephen could just make out the forms of four men.

Not an instant did he hesitate, although knowing that if they were armed his life might pay the forfeit of his audacity; he shouted to them as he leaped into the middle of the road,—

'Stop, or I fire!'

Thus hailed, the car did stop. Stephen sent the private to the horse's head, and then opening the bull's-eye lantern he carried, examined the inmates; at first cursorily, to identify their number, and see if they had weapons in their hands or near them.

'Who are you, and where are you from?' he first asked the driver.

'Shure now, I'm the driver of the car, and I'm from ——,' mentioning the name of a place where there had been a pig-fair that day.

'And who are these with you?'

'Oh, very honest gintlemen — pig-jobbers.'

'All of them?'

'I believe so; but, shure, you can inquire for yourself.'

'Do you know either of them?'

'Certainly I do, and for many a year, and by token of many a job—and handsomely they've paid me when I was hard put to it.'

'Which of them do you know?'

'This one,' said the driver, touching the arm of one of the men.

And Stephen poured the stream of light on his face.

'And this one,' continued the driver, pointing with his whip at a second of the men in the car.

Again Stephen looked at the man in the fierce light of the lamp, and when he spoke it seemed as though he had seen nothing more serious than pig-jobbery in the face of either.

'And as to the third?' demanded Stephen, directing his lamp for an instant at the driver's countenance.

'Oh, he's been at the fair, too; but walked on, thinking some friends would pick him up, and that's just what happened.'

'Where?'

'Oh, not far off. But he's all right. Good-night!'

He shook the reins to go on, but Stephen stopped him with,—

'If you don't want my comrade's bayonet in your horse's belly, and a shot from his rifle in your own brains, you'll stop where you are till I bid you proceed.'

The driver lowered his whip, and Stephen, going round to the other side of car, where the third man sat, levelled his bull's-eye at him ; and saw a figure with a thick shawl round his neck, wearing a cap with ears that came down and partly covered his face.

'It's all right, pig-jobbing all day, and wanting to be at home, and out of the cold at night,' said the person in question, with a half laugh.

What with his natural care to guard against the cold, and his genial comment, he and his fellow-travellers might in a few seconds more have been allowed to pass ; for Stephen had been told of the fair, and of the probability that some, and possibly tipsy men, would be passing in the night.

But there was a peculiarity in the voice that he seemed to remember—though where or under what circumstances he could not for the life of him recall. So thinking, but with no idea in his mind that

he was about to elicit anything of moment, he said,—

'I seem to remember your voice. Have we met before?' And again the light streamed on the man's face.

Another thought now startled Stephen, and caused him to say,—

'Be so good as to remove your shawl and take off your cap.'

'What, in a night like this?' was the rejoinder.

The answer was Stephen's rifle and bayonet pointed at him.

He removed his shawl and cap, and Stephen lowered his rifle, but kept careful watch, with his bayonet in his right hand, while using the lamp with his left.

Readers may imagine his emotion when he beheld and recognised the face of the Three Days' Fenian!—the man in whom he had been so interested in the train to Holyhead; and who was, doubtless, the mysterious rustler of the leaves in the wood; and engaged, in all probability, in the very business of the night for which the troops waited.

'Ah! is that you?' he exclaimed, in joyful surprise, or what was made to appear very like it.

'Descend!' said Stephen, sternly and abruptly.

Then turning to his comrade, he said,—

'Bullock, come here!'

'Why, my good fellow, what is the matter?' asked the Three Days' Fenian.

'Descend!' again said Stephen, with still more dangerous tone and accent.

The Three Days' Fenian accordingly descended.

'Turn out your pockets!' was the next command. 'Bullock, help him!'

And again he was obeyed.

'Feel that one in the breast-lining of his coat,' said Stephen to the private.

The Three Days' Fenian put his hand to his breast, hesitated for a second or two, as if feeling for it, looked at Stephen, who held his bayonet ready for the slightest sinister movement, and drew forth a revolver.

'Take it,' said Stephen to his companion, and to him it was quietly given.

'Ascend the car!'

As the Three Days' Fenian was retaking his seat, Stephen sent the private again to the horse's head, taking the revolver from him. He looked at it and at its owner, and asked,—

'Is it loaded?'

'You had better try,' was the sullen response.

Reviewing the position—four men before him, one of whom he was certain was dangerous, while they might all be connected, and with the means of escape in their hands, could they, by a rush, pass and overpower him; he was half-tempted to shoot the horse, but could not decide on so painful a step except in the last necessity.

Suddenly, the Three Days' Fenian snatched the whip from the driver, tumbled him off by a violent blow, and, lashing the horse with the utmost fury, would in a few moments have escaped.

But Stephen's comrade was too quick for him. He fired—the animal fell and kicked convulsively, so the soldier thrust his bayonet into him, and relieved him by death.

Then Stephen turned to the baffled Three Days' Fenian, who was rising from the ground, to which he and the other men had been violently thrown, and said,—

'I think you had better try no more experiments!'

Both the other sentinels were now heard running, roused by the shot, and presently joined Stephen.

'Guard these men—that man especially,' indicating the Three Days' Fenian. 'Shoot them if they attempt to move. I go to report to the commanding officer.'

When he had gone a few paces he stopped, returned, came to the man whom, he was now convinced, was anything but a Fenian of three days only, and said to him, with much feeling,—

'I could wish any other man had this duty to perform; but, as it is, farewell!'

He turned and passed away.

CHAPTER III.

THE CORPORAL IN THE ANTE-CHAMBER.

TO seek the major in the interior of the house, Stephen could not help thinking, was to incur the risk of meeting his own relatives, an event that he desired of all things to avoid.

It had been arranged that Stephen, in his communications with the major, if he had occasion to make any, should use the same door as that used by the soldiers on their return.

Thither he went, and after finding his own way into a long corridor, he saw a livery servant at the other end, and called to him.

But the man was either too busy to

attend to a common soldier, or too excited by the presence of the guests, the music, and the dance, by the flow of wines, in which possibly he managed to share, or by the news, which began to get known, of the possibility of a Fenian attack, all together making a veritable sensation. At all events he only stopped for a moment to see who it was called, and then hurried away.

Guided by the hum of many voices, and thinking, as he threaded the intricacies of the place in search, how easily a few Fenians, did they know, might follow his example, and then let in their whole body suddenly upon soldiers, hosts, and guests alike, Stephen at last came to a large servants' hall; where many of the soldiers were posted, sitting on chairs, on forms, or on the floor—but all having their arms in their hands, or close by their side.

There he found Sergeant Grabbe, told him briefly what had happened, and asked him to find the major, and say where he was waiting orders; adding with some embarrassment, as if conscious he was a little disingenuous,—

'I don't want to go farther, in case of anything happening to the men I left in charge that may necessitate my immediate return.'

'All right, Shand,' said the sergeant, whose speech was a little thick; as if he had not very strictly enforced, in his own case, the rule of temperance he had most carefully enjoined on his men.

So he went to an anteroom adjoining the ballroom, where he found servants in waiting, and sent one of them to say Major Etheredge was wanted outside.

The opening of the door for the servant's entrance caused a flood of dance music to stream through, and so was heard by Stephen faintly in the servants' hall.

Again rose the desire to get a glimpse of Miss Vandeleur, if but a single one; and he regretted now that he had not himself demanded to see the major, who was not unlikely to be annoyed at his not doing so, seeing how special had been the mission entrusted to him.

The reality of that desire and of that regret were at once put to the test, for

the sergeant presently returned, the jolly face with which he had gone having changed in the interim to a stormy one.

'He says, why don't you go to him yourself, and that he can't at all understand what I told him. But that's your fault, not mine.'

'No doubt, sergeant—and I am sorry I was not clearer in my report.'

'Anyhow, he awaits you in the anteroom.'

'How shall I find my way.'

'Any fool can tell you that;' and the sergeant went to his seat, and to his unfinished glass of toddy.

Stephen could not make general proclamation among his comrades, for the one individual fool who would do what he wanted, so he set off in the direction he had seen the sergeant go; and then guided by the music, reached the place.

Major Etheredge was on the watch, evidently impatient for his coming; and after giving him a slight reproof for not hastening directly thither, told Shand to tell him exactly what had happened.

He listened with the deepest interest;

and well he might do so. For he had already heard a rumour that there was a large body of armed Fenians collected at a particular spot, sheltered from general observation. They had been marching with great rapidity, had then unexpectedly paused, and were still pausing, as though waiting for some special intelligence; or, as some vague remarks that had been overheard in the darkness by a scout seemed to imply, as though their leader had not yet arrived, or had left them for some important purpose, and not yet rejoined.

'Is it possible, major, this is the man?' asked Stephen.

'I do believe it is! If so, it is a haul of the first importance. Wait till I call Lord Harlaxton.'

He was going, when interrupted by Stephen's sudden call,—

'Major, I beg your pardon.' Here he paused in the search for fitting thoughts and words; and the major could not but notice how his face had coloured. 'You were so kind—I think—as to say to me on one occasion that—that—'

'That I would gladly be of service to you if I could. I did so. Has the occasion come?' His penetrating glance in Stephen's face as he said this was so full of consciousness, that he might be on the eve of some discovery about Stephen's family, that the latter's course became only the more difficult, and he could but say,—

'If, major, you would kindly excuse me —I—'

'You know Lord Harlaxton?'

'He knows me.'

'Ah, I understand. Its awkward, perhaps impossible to avoid a meeting. He is the magistrate who will have to examine these men—or rather the one man who alone seems to be important—and you are the one indispensable witness.'

'Very well, major. I cannot presume to ask that I should be an obstacle to justice, or to the performers of duty.'

'But let me see,' thoughtfully remarked the major. 'The whole business is yet in the vague, and concerns the military rather than the civil authorities. I am not sure indeed whether it would not be better for me alone to deal with this man at present;

keep him under our charge till we return to camp, pump him, and see if he will respond; and finally hand him over with all the materials we can collect to the proper authorities for his examination and trial should the evidence be sufficiently complete. You can greatly help in that matter.'

'Perhaps I ought to tell you, major, that I have seen and conversed with that man before, and that but for a partial recollection of his voice I am afraid I should have let him go.'

'You did not tell me that before,' said the major, sharply.

'No, major, because I desired not to confuse my general report with anything not necessary at the moment. But I intended to ask your permission at the first opportunity.'

'All right. But the opportunity must be now. Sit down.'

Stephen, still keeping his weapon, which looked strangely out of place, within the circle of his arms, sat down and narrated most faithfully the substance of the whole conversation in the train, not concealing his own sympathy with the man, while hostile to his cause.

'He must have been trying to deceive you in order to discover if you were either friend or foe.'

'Pardon me, I think not, major. I fancy there is a passage in the Bible which gives the explanation roughly but naturally — the dog going back to his vomit.'

'Exactly. You think he did intend to quit the Fenian cause—but the old Adam in him was the conqueror—and so he is here, our prisoner. Go for him and the others, and I will myself examine them—somewhere where we can be private. Stay! Wait till I have spoken to Lord Harlaxton, and I will go with you to find a place so that you can come there without fuss or inquiry. We must keep all as quiet as possible. Lord Harlaxton and I had a subdued laugh together a few minutes ago between the dances, as we made mutual acknowledgments what hypocrites we were seeming; to have no other thought and wish than to bask in the smiles of the ladies, while really thinking and anxious about possible business of so opposite a character!

'As to Lord Harlaxton, if I do not quiet him with regard to your report he will certainly be seeking us both to hear more; for I said a few words to him on receiving the sergeant's not very perspicuous statements.'

And so saying he passed into the ball-room, leaving the door half open as it happened, so that Stephen could not only see a large part of the room, but also many of those who occupied it.

Some were promenading, and passing on their way so near that Stephen could hear their voices, and distinguish their faces.

Should he now see Miss Vandeleur?

Strange as it may sound, hers was the first voice that he next heard; and while it thrilled it also jarred, for she was engaged in an animated conversation with a handsome young fellow; and laughing in answer to some of his remarks, which Stephen thought were made in an insidiously low, and fervid tone.

As he sat, with the light behind him, and therefore with his face in partial shade, he ventured to stare boldly before

him, but making no movement, looking as a mere soldier might be expected to look, when a scene so brilliant and so novel was passing before his eyes.

In that position he was when she again passed; and in that position he sat immoveable, as she looked, saw the young soldier there, and directed her companion's attention also to him; and the result was that she herself was to him in the moment when they looked at each other little more than a shadow seen in a dream, through the emotion he felt at the fear she might be recognising him, and then what would she say or do?

But the pair passed on, and he saw no more of them. For the major came out, and they went away together.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FENIAN'S CONFESSION.

THE major's first business was to make arrangements for the bringing in the prisoners so as to attract as little notice as possible.

That settled, he sought for and obtained what was not then a very easy matter, a private room for their examination, the place being so crowded. Meantime Stephen hurried away to bring the men; and before many minutes had passed, all concerned were collected together in the house, while a guard watched outside the door, and the window.

The scene was curious, and interested Stephen greatly.

The room was simply a very large linen closet with bare floor, and entirely empty of furniture, except a fine old oak chair, richly carved, that had been brought in for the major. It was lighted by a tiny jet of gas from the ceiling, which had been hastily supplemented by a pair of silver candlesticks and wax candles, placed upon a plain round deal table.

A fire had been lighted on account of the extreme coldness of the night, but was burning badly and smoking; yet every now and then it puffed forth a jet of flame, which cast a sudden radiance on the nearest forms and faces, and died out again as suddenly.

The one small window revealed only the intense darkness of the night, but gave a new trial to the feeling of those inside, by the frequent sound of dull heavy raps on the glass; due to some branch which the wind shook, as if to accentuate something which particularly interested it, in weird fashion, and as if it urged more rapid progress.

The major was seated at the head of he table, and at the other end stood

the driver and the two pig-jobbers; all looking chilly, careworn, and anxious, and carefully keeping aloof from the Three Days' Fenian.

He, on his part, stood with folded arms; his tall, slender, sinewy figure loftily surveying by turns now his late companions, now the major and Stephen (who stood near his commanding officer), but as if the proceedings might concern any one rather than him.

The driver was first examined, and repeated the evidence he had given Stephen; but with the rather serious addition that the man whom they had taken up into the car had joined them scarcely a hundred yards away from the spot where Stephen had arrested their course; and, therefore, was doubtless the man who had been hovering for some unknown purpose about the sentries, and the man whom Stephen had followed.

That fact was confirmed by the two pig-jobbers; who, anxious to clear themselves at the earliest possible moment, stated that they were both well known to the driver, and called on him to speak.

'And I, your honour,' called out the driver, with sudden animation, 'am well known to one of the servants of this very mansion—Phil Joyce by name, a cousin of my wife's cousin—who can speak to my character for many a year, and that I've never had dealings of any kind with the Fenians—if that is what I am suspected of.'

Phil Joyce was sent for, and so thoroughly confirmed the driver's statement, that the major was satisfied the driver and the pig-jobbers were innocent; and therefore valuable witnesses against the man they had taken up into the car at his request, simply, as he said, to give him a lift; but more probably because seeing his danger from the unknown persons who had so persistently followed him through the wood, he thought thus to baffle his pursuers; and pass with them if there were soldiers about likely to interfere.

The three men then testified to their entire ignorance about that man; and their names and addresses having been taken down, and themselves warned they

might be called on as witnesses, they were told they might go.

'But my horse is killed, your honour! I'll be a ruined man if I don't get another at once.'

'Ah! well, that must be seen to. I dare-say that will be set right for you by-and-by.'

'Ah! but, your honour, how am I to take these gintlemen to their homes—they have ten miles to go. And then I have to get back fifteen miles.'

'Oh,' said one of the pig-jobbers, 'your honour can easily settle that for him and us too.'

'Ay? How?'

'Just lend us one of your troopers' horses for the night.'

The major laughed right out before he could answer.

'There are two difficulties in the way, my friend. I have no spare cavalry, so cannot oblige you if I would; and I would not if I could, so you must manage as well as you can. I wish you all a good night, and a pleasant walk home, if that be possible.'

The driver was about to remonstrate, but Stephen gently forced him out of the room, the pig-jobbers following in silence, but full of discontent that the major would not lend them one of his horses.

When they were gone the real business of the meeting began; the Three Days' Fenian and the major alike prepared, as was shown by the looks they exchanged.

'What is your name?'

'I decline to answer.'

'Where were you coming from and where bound to when arrested?'

'I decline to answer.'

'Upon what business were you engaged?'

'My own business.'

'Of what nature?'

'That concerns myself alone.'

'I'm afraid I shall have to convince you it also concerns me. Observe now. You are found at midnight with two pig-jobbers; you declare yourself one, yet you are quite unknown to the companions who have taken you up as a matter of kindness; a revolver, fully loaded, is found on you; and when you perceive the corporal here

grows suspicious and likely to arrest you, you seize the driver's whip, you lash the horse cruelly, and would probably have escaped but that the horse was instantly shot. Under these remarkable circumstances you decline to tell your name, your business, or to give yourself any chance of escape from being treated as one engaged unlawfully, perhaps criminally. I invite you, therefore, to reconsider the matter, and satisfy me, for your own sake, if you can.'

There was in the tone of the major's voice, as well as in his words, something that did produce a momentary hesitation, and gave time to reconsider. But it rapidly passed away as the prisoner said, recovering his defiant attitude,—

'I have nothing more to say.'

'And you have no witnesses that you can produce, now or at a later period, who can prove that you are a loyal subject of the Queen; and so allow me to take it for granted that the suspicious circumstances of the night are essentially of a private and individual nature, about which I need not further concern myself?'

Again the Three Days' Fenian paused a few seconds to reflect, perhaps thinking such evidence might be obtained somehow; but if so the idea was speedily rejected, as tending only to bring friends into the danger in which he was.

'No. In brief, I decline to acknowledge that there has been anything in my behaviour to justify my arrest. And when I am set free, as I must be, I shall make it my business to seek redress for whatever injuries I may have suffered in my business or person.'

'That is enough. I shall not at present hand you over to the civil power. I must know more about you first, and the information you decline to give I must seek elsewhere. You will, therefore, be taken back with us to the camp as a prisoner when we go; and meantime no one will be permitted to see, speak, or communicate with you in any way, except through the corporal who arrested you.'

The Three Days' Fenian looked at Stephen, and Stephen at him, neither able to say whether he was pleased or sorry at being thrown into a renewal of

acquaintance under such painful circumstances.

The prisoner was then removed under a strong guard to an underground but airy cellar, and sentinels placed over him, one inside the cellar door, and one outside the cellar window, while others were on guard near, in case the expected Fenian attack should be first directed in search of him, as the major strongly suspected would be the case; for he was more and more inclined to think the bold fellow was the real leader of the proposed attack; and had, in the uncertainty about the presence of the soldiers at Gualtmore, determined to discover at his own risk the true state of the case, before leading his men into what might prove to be a trap for their destruction.

'Ah,' thought the kindly major, as he then speculated on the motives of the man, 'how sad it is such qualities cannot be used to bind up the wounds of this unhappy country, instead of, as at present, for ever widening them; and making them rankle by dwelling on a past, which no true Englishman wishes to perpetuate.'

The major went back less disposed than ever to the enjoyments of the song and the dance, but feeling it a duty to aid Lord Harlaxton in keeping up the confidence of his relatives and friends in their security; while maintaining the position first assumed for the benefit of Fenian scouts or spies, if any such were near, if that security was still to be menaced.

Stephen and the sentries had once more resumed their duties outside, and so once more the former had moments of eager curiosity and anxious suspense in passing the window of the ballroom; yearning, while annoyed at his own behaviour, to see Miss Vandeleur again.

The loyal scouts, horse and foot, now began to bring in news that it was true there had been a great assemblage of armed men, but they had dissolved, had been seen dispersing, and followed to make sure the fact was so.

And with it came (though on more doubtful evidence) the explanation that the Head Centre, their commander, who had been seen by the scouts on a white pony, was taken prisoner.

And, to anticipate the end of this episode in Stephen's career, subsequent discoveries confirmed these reports. Little by little evidence was collected that proved beyond doubt the Three Days' Fenian was an honoured, as he was undoubtedly an able, Fenian leader.

He was, after some weeks' delay, accordingly put on his trial. Stephen was necessarily an important witness. But when questioned beforehand by the prosecutor as to his conversation with the prisoner in the Holyhead train, he positively refused to say one word on the subject.

'It was mere gossip in mutual confidence,' so he described it; and only mentioned to the major to invoke sympathy, if that were at all admissible for the prisoner, not to injure him.

And in spite of threats and prospective rewards, it was found impossible to move him. The major was then appealed to, but declined to interfere.

The trial proceeded. But it was soon seen the prisoner had no chance of escape. He was found guilty of treason, and sentenced to twenty years' penal servitude.

His last act before disappearing into the awful obscurity of the life to which he was condemned, was to send for Stephen to thank him for his reticence, and for all he had individually done apart from the arrest, which he acknowledged to be a duty, from Stephen's own point of sight.

And Stephen was moved to reply,—

'If circumstances should leave the intervention of a friend possible as time passes, and the country settles down—'

'It will never settle down while things are as they are!' passionately broke in the Fenian. 'God forbid that they should, or that I should wish it for my own selfish sake.'

'Well, but if they do,' persisted Stephen with a gentle smile. 'Strange things happen, and should this happen, and I be able to assist—' there he paused, considering what next he should say, feeling he had gone too far not to go farther.

The Three Days' Fenian and he looked in each other's faces; and at length the former, grasping Stephen's hand, ejaculated,—

'I know what you must mean, and was thinking it must be so—while the major was examining my companions.'

'Then I need say no more but that it is likely I may be found in quite a different position within the next four or five years, so—'

'If I do seek the assistance of anyone it shall be you.'

'I will leave an address with your counsel before I leave Ireland—if I do leave it—that will be sufficient for your purpose. Farewell!'

Again they grasped hands, and the Fenian seemed so unwilling to let go, that Stephen fancied something had been unsaid which the prisoner wanted to say.

'Is there anything more that—' he asked, leaving the sentence unfinished.

'Well, I have been in many minds about it, but I think you should know. I could have shot you down from the car. I saw the precise moment—and was tempted.'

'But resisted, if I am any judge,' said Stephen, with a smile.

'I knew you, and could not do it. That's all. Good-bye.'

With moisture in the eyes of both they separated, to meet in all probability no more.

CHAPTER V.

CRITICAL GLANCES.

THE influx of news mentioned in the last chapter, some of which reached Stephen first, gave him an excuse for another visit to Major Etheredge in the anteroom.

It must be acknowledged that the desire to catch a glimpse of Miss Vandeleur, gave factitious importance to all he could have to say.

The major came out and treated with all due respect Stephen's new facts, but ended with one that impressed Stephen more forcibly than any he had succeeded in impressing on the major.

He told him he was satisfied that in this part of the country at all events the move-

ment had collapsed; the flying column had done its work, and he had already given the order for the march home at ten next morning; the earl undertaking to make the troops as comfortable as he could, during the intervening hours, 'regretting it was impossible to find them beds,' said the major, with a laugh.

He ended what he had to say by again telling Stephen to wait where he was while he wished the host, hostess, and guests 'good-night;' when he would go with Stephen to make the necessary arrangements for safety, as though danger still threatened, 'for mind,' he said, 'a soldier at such times leaves nothing to trust!'

Once more then Stephen could dream of the possibility during these few moments of seeing the face and form that hourly grew more absorbingly attractive in remembrance. And fortune was so kind to him as to give him even more than he sought. A livery servant opened wide the door which the major had left ajar, and two persons came forth, arm in arm, the lady in white, with a spray of blush roses in her hair;

the gentleman tall, rather pompous in manner, both conversing, she looking tired and weary, he as if feeling he did her a kindness by trying to amuse her.

'I think, Frances, I have a surprise for you, and that is why I brought you this way.'

'Indeed! and what is that?'

'A portrait of your father in his youth, that you have never seen—perhaps never heard of.'

'That will be indeed a pleasure;' and the sudden animation in her face testified to the sincerity of her words.

Stephen might have heard and understood this conversation, but that the very first glance revealed to him who they were —Miss Vandeleur, and his brother, the earl; and left him too deeply affected to listen.

It was too late to move, and he could not turn away. His eyes were drawn by an irresistible fascination to her face, watching for the moment when she would possibly recognise him, and beyond that all seemed chaos.

He was, however, conscious that Lord Harlaxton saw him, but only as a common

soldier, who needed no second glance; and that Miss Vandeleur was looking towards the earl's face, as if he had said something which she failed to hear, and so he thought he should escape recognition after all.

But at the moment when she was nearest to him in passing, she did turn to look at the young soldier; thinking probably it might be the one of whom the major had spoken. She gazed with kindly interest, which suddenly changed when she saw—yet for a moment tried to disbelieve it could be—Stephen, but the emotion of his face answered her.

Hardly knowing what he did, he confirmed his identity by a sort of instinctive appeal to her for silence, by touching his lips with his finger; which she answered by a bow so slight, that only one who hung upon her slightest movement, would have perceived it, and known its meaning.

During the rest of the night, when he might have slept, he found sleep impossible. Every minute he expected some message, some visitor—perhaps his mother—possibly the earl—and at times

he fancied even Miss Vandeleur might come, if only to renounce her tacit promise of silence, and to beg him to go with her to his mother.

But when he remembered where he was —among a number of other soldiers—he saw the absurdity of supposing either of the three would come there to claim him by the right of family ties.

But how would it be in the morning? Something then would surely happen. He speculated on the possibility of getting away before the other troops. But finally he satisfied himself by reflecting that Miss Vandeleur would in all probability keep his secret for a time; perhaps purposely delay until he had gone; and then treat her silent promise as sufficiently fulfilled, and then—and then only—reveal that she had seen him, and in what capacity.

Nothing occurred in the morning to contradict this prospect. The troops were paraded on the lawn, the guests watching from the windows, and at one window, and alone, Stephen saw Miss Vandeleur.

The march began. The troops passed the front of the mansion in honour of their host.

He and Miss Vandeleur had by that time assembled in the entrance porch. Stephen saw them there, and felt sure he would be recognised by his brother. In vain he sought for the face of his mother. She was perhaps still in bed, worn by the late festivities of the night.

The moment he dreaded, yet coveted, came. But the earl's eyes were seeking those of the major and other officers, and bowing to them. Miss Vandeleur's, he felt, were seeking only him.

When that second recognition happened she waved her handkerchief; and Stephen, while bending in acknowledgment, knew that she would be supposed to be simply taking leave of the troops. And as to him, why, nobody would trouble to ask why so an unimportant a man bowed, if anybody happened to notice the occurrence at all.

Once more, when he had passed, he looked back, and again the handkerchief bade him farewell.

'She has forgiven me,' he thought with emotion, 'but perhaps too late for me to draw any other conclusion.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE CALM BEFORE A STORM.

PASSING over as uneventful the return to the camp, and the settling down of the major and his troops into the ordinary state of things, we resume our narrative a few weeks later.

The adventures of the flying column, enhanced and adorned by the more imaginative of the sharers in it, formed for a long time a subject of animated talk and comment among those left behind.

As to Stephen himself, when day after day passed without that summons he was hourly expecting to receive, perhaps from the colonel of the regiment, to meet before him his relatives, his anxiety began to

cease, his belief to strengthen that Miss Vandeleur was still keeping secret the fact she had seen him; and so he might rest and turn once more to his duties, and the consideration how to so fulfil them as to ensure what he now greatly coveted—rapid advancement.

But, strange to say, he no longer found satisfaction in them, because he no longer seemed to have the same ambitious motives; each day seemed more wearisome than the one before; he became depressed in spirit, though he knew not why, unless it was that he looked forward to a long period of blank dulness of life that seemed intolerable.

But it often happens in life as in the natural phenomena of the seasons, that such periods are only the precursors of events of signal importance, that rouse up to new struggles and new emotions; which, whether tending to our welfare or the reverse, certainly leave us in no mood for listless melancholy or self solace.

Stephen was destined to receive in his own person an illustration of this truth, when Gentleman Jack came with effusive congratulations on his courage generally,

and of his wonderful presence of mind in particular, in that magnificent exploit of shooting the scout, and saving the major's life.

To stop all this, Stephen, who had already heard something about Jack's behaviour during his absence, dryly said,—

'What about yourself? If I remember rightly I left you in prison?'

'Yes; and, to tell you the truth, I liked it so well on the whole that when I did get out I didn't mind getting into it once or twice more. That pack drill nearly broke my back; it has affected my heart, so I got into the infirmary on the last occasion, and enjoyed myself, and read or slept all day.'

'Does the doctor credit you about the heart?'

'Well, he was rather sharp—unpleasantly personal, and decidedly suspicious, but on the whole dubious, so gave me the benefit of the doubt.'

'I wouldn't try him again, Jack.'

'Well, now you are come back I feel more comfortable, and able to put up with the rascally amenities of my life—'

'Hush, Jack! I see Tommy Atkins near, and I suspect listening. Besides, I am a non-commissioned officer myself, and shall feel it a duty to report any insubordinate language.'

'Tommy Atkins,' said Jack in a low voice, while carefully avoiding to look in the direction indicated, 'Are you sure he is there?'

'Yes,' responded Stephen.

'Then I must tell you some other time things I wanted to say.'

'There he goes,' interrupted Stephen. 'He is now gone.'

'Well, he did not love you before you went with the flying column, now he hates you with an almost devilish hatred, because of the distinction you have achieved, and because all men speak so well of you.'

'I hope not, for if that was the case I think I should be really in a bad way.'

'Beware of him!'

'Oh, really Jack, you talk sad nonsense. Isn't it your head rather than your heart that is getting weak. What can a poor creature like that do to injure me?'

'Tell tales of men that can hurt you,

and make them believe it is you who are engaged in that delectable occupation. If there is one crime more black than another in a soldier's eyes, it is telling tales about one another; and if a superior is concerned the matter becomes ten times worse, and more dangerous.'

'And have you any reason whatever that will bear examination for coming to the belief that Tommy Atkins is either fool enough or rogue enough to try to hurt me in this way?'

'Judge. For some time before your return I noticed what a lickspittle Tommy was to Sergeant Grabbe of your company, and how greedily the sergeant enjoyed the process. Since your return I have seen them again and again, carefully drawn apart out of hearing — Tommy eagerly whispering, the sergeant angrily listening. Look, look! There they are again, in close talk together. If it is about you, they may as well not suspect I have warned you, or Grabbe may indirectly through my sergeant pay me the debt he thinks he owes you. Good-bye.'

And therewith Gentleman Jack moved

away, but with a sauntering air as if thinking of nothing in particular.

Now Stephen had noticed a fact he did not choose to tell his former friend, and that was that Sergeant Grabbe—a good sort of a man in his own way, but credulous and obstinate—who had been friendly to Stephen from the time he first enlisted him up to his departure with the flying column, had, since his return, unmistakably shown him the cold shoulder; and when he had occasion to speak to Stephen, had done it with something uncommonly like an ebullition of disgust.

This Stephen had passed over with the reflection it was only a fit of jealousy; which does sometimes break out among military men who have not had chances they think they ought to have had, and which is apt to turn against those who have been more lucky.

But this was quite a new aspect of the matter; and led him to try to recall anything that might have happened likely to be turned to evil purpose, if Tommy Atkins was scoundrel enough to try it on.

He tried in vain. He could think of nothing that promised enlightenment.

Should he go at once to the pair before they separated, and challenge a statement of anything he had done amiss?

But then that would implicate Jack, and perhaps get him once more into trouble and serious danger, if he spoke truly about the state of his heart. Stephen had heard of such cases before, in connection with the severity of the pack drill.

While thus deliberating he saw the two men divide, and the sergeant cross the grass directly towards himself. Now then he would know all. Calmly and respectfully he looked towards the approaching sergeant, whose face he saw darkening as he drew near.

'Shand, I want to ask you a question or two. I have reason to believe somebody has been poisoning the sergeant-major's mind about me, and that you are the man!'

'Will you tell me why you think so?'

'Will you answer my questions?'

'Certainly, if I can.'

'I understand you have been speaking

to him several times within the last two days, when there were no matters of military duty to require it?'

For a moment Stephen was tempted to reply,—

'Why, that is what I am told you and Tommy Atkins have been doing about me,' but his good sense arrested the impulse. So what he did was to acknowledge the truth of the statement, and to accompany it with the explanation,—

'The sergeant-major is personally friendly to me, and we often have a chat together.'

The sergeant was silent for a few seconds, looking baffled, but incredulous. And from his silence, his manner, and his hesitation, Stephen saw there was evidently something in his mind which it was not agreeable to bring out, and which he had perhaps hoped he might avoid by making Stephen take the initiative.

But as Stephen showed no inclination to do this, the sergeant said,—

'Did you tell the sergeant-major you had seen me speaking to a woman outside

the camp, and when I ought to have been in the barracks?'

'Never!' said Stephen indignantly. But the word was accompanied by a slight tinge of colour in his face as he spoke, for he now remembered he had seen Sergeant Grabbe, where and when described, though thinking nothing of the matter, for he might have had a pass; and the woman might be a relative or other person come to see him on perfectly legitimate business, though so late.

'Did you see me, as I have said?'

'Yes.'

'And then told the sergeant-major?'

'No—I—' but the sergeant waited for no further explanation.

'You lie! You are a —— liar!' he roared out, and the next instant was sprawling on the ground; for Stephen, before the words were well out of his mouth, forgetting everything in the world but the insult, knocked him down.

As the sergeant regained his feet and looked at Stephen, there was in his face an expression that intensified all the latter felt at his own want of self-con-

trol, and at the danger now confronting him.

'Sergeant,' he began—and for once his voice showed the agitation in which he spoke—'I trust you will in a calmer mood see that it was the *man* who, under what he felt to be a great provocation, and having no time to think, retaliated. As a *soldier* I have done very wrong, and I humbly beg your pardon.'

'You can explain that distinction to the court-martial. Consider yourself under arrest. Stay where you are, or it will be worse for you.'

And away went the sergeant.

'Will he go at once for a guard, or will he take time to reflect,' ruminated Stephen. 'Madman that I was so to forget myself! Well, the job is done. And I am likely to have plenty of leisure to think of the consequences.'

In this state of mind Stephen paced to and fro, and was presently joined by Gentleman Jack, who knew nothing of what had happened.

They talked for a minute or two on any topic that came uppermost, Stephen's

whole thoughts being absorbed on that one other topic he carefully shunned speaking of; when he was interrupted by a very peculiar sound from some drummers at a little distance.

'Jack, what are the drummers doing?'

'I've been asking that myself. When a man is flogged, he's apt, you see, to disturb the sensitive ears of his officers by unreasonable noise; but the drummers are ready, and they effectually stop all cause for scandal. These are learners.'

'Is there any case of that kind likely to come on?'

'I judge so, within a few days by this preparation. The new colonel, who joined while you were away with the flying column, is, they tell me, a man with but one notion in his head, that if things go generally wrong, he must flog till they get particularly right. This is his first chance to tell the regiment his mind so plainly that there can be no future mistakes, and he's not likely to let it slip.'

'What's his name?'

'Hobson.'

'He was in the same packet that brought

me from Holyhead. He looks the character you describe. What has the man done?'

'While half drunk was abusive to his sergeant, and ended by striking him. If he's made of the mettle of the last man who was flogged some months ago, the drummers needn't be troubled.'

'Tell me—it isn't a cheerful subject,' remarked Stephen parenthetically; 'but if you or I should ever—'

'There!' exclaimed Gentleman Jack, 'that'll do. My flesh creeps already! I shall feel the lash if you say any more!'

'But about this man of mettle?'

'Did you hear me cry domino, when I won the game? No, I remember, that was before you returned, and when I was getting inquisitive as to the identity of the "Swell," so talked of and so praised, and whether he was my valued friend. Well, when I cried domino, I was then thinking of that man's story. He went quite coolly to the triangle, gave no one the least trouble, and even, they do say, smiled in acknowledgment of the attentions paid him in the presence of the entire regiment

drawn up in square. The first lash fell—he winced, drew a long, deep, shuddering breath, but gave forth no cry of any kind. Then lash after lash, but still no response —not one single groan was wrung from him. But as the last lash was given, and he was released, he threw up his arms, and shouted so that the whole regiment would hear, "Domino! I have won the game!" And he had. He pitted his courage and endurance against the worst they could do, and he won. Ah!' added Gentleman Jack, thoughtfully, after a pause, 'if only one could be sure of going through the job in that style, one might run the risk under sufficient temptation. What do you think?'

'The question is weighty,' rejoined Stephen, 'and requires deliberation. Ask me to-morrow!'

CHAPTER VII.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

'JACK,' said Stephen, hurriedly, after a long period of silence on the part of both, 'I see the major coming this way, and I want particularly to speak to him alone.'

'All right,' was the reply, and Gentleman Jack set off to see if he could beg, borrow, or obtain by any other connivance a copper or two, to refresh his depressed spirits in the canteen.

Stephen was greatly cheered by the chance of thus telling his own story of the sergeant's downfall, perhaps even before the sergeant himself had been to the major. So prompt a meeting might be his salvation.

The reader can imagine his astonish-

ment when prepared, and ready, and looking the major's way, he saw he had been joined by a figure he thought familiar to him, and in a few moments more recognised as that of his brother, Lord Harlaxton.

As the two came close Stephen saluted the major, but made no sign as regarded the earl, who for the moment was equally reserved.

'Is that the gentleman you seek?' asked Major Etheredge of the new comer.

'Thank you. Yes,' said the earl.

'I do not presume to guess what your lordship's visit may portend,' remarked the major, who had noticed the mutual coldness; 'whether we are to lose or retain the services of our young soldier; but it is only right to say that, apart from what I have told you of his behaviour in the expedition, I have never met with one who has so much interested me by his performance of the most irksome duties in a cheerful, unmoved spirit.'

'It is a testimony that honours both,' said Lord Harlaxton.

But there was no fervour, much less

enthusiasm, in his tone or manner. And he proceeded to introduce his brother to the major, in the coldest and most formal way, as 'The Honourable Stephen Chandos Froude.'

The major's warmth on the other hand was equally remarkable. He shook Stephen by the hand, as he said to him,—

'I half anticipated some such result before. I am truly pleased to welcome now the entire truth.'

'I shall immediately apply for his discharge,' said the earl, somewhat moved by the major's behaviour to think of his own.

'Which I will facilitate in every way that I can,' said the major.

Unluckily for their kind intentions, the person chiefly concerned was by no means prepared to accept the aid proffered.

'Major,' he said, 'believe me I am truly grateful, but I am obliged to refuse. I do not intend to leave the army, under present circumstances.'

The awkward and painful double meaning, or application of the last three words,

only occurred to Stephen after they had been spoken.

'Oh, come, come!' rejoined Major Etheredge, 'talk that over with your brother.' Then addressing himself to the earl, he said,—'Your lordship, I hope, will honour us with your company at the mess this evening?'

'I should only be too glad,' was the reply, 'but I am in attendance on a young lady, a relative, who is waiting close by to see my brother on family business matters, and we leave immediately after our interview with him.'

'Then the sooner I take my leave the better,' said the major with a smile, and he and the earl parted with courteous words and a feeling of mutual respect.

And then Stephen and the earl were alone, the former full of wonder at what he had heard, and somewhat agitated at the prospect of again meeting Miss Vandeleur, while such a special danger overhung.

'Feeling, as I do, the disgrace you have brought on us by this mad freak,' began Lord Harlaxton, the moment the major

had passed out of hearing, 'I yet desire to relieve you from a false position, and to secure you all reasonable help in shaping your future.'

'You are very kind, but I have shaped that out for myself,' responded Stephen.

'Well, as you please. Miss Vandeleur waits with her attendant to deliver a message from your mother.'

'Message!' echoed Stephen, and looking disturbed. 'Of what nature?'

'The countess is fond of secrets; I have not yet been admitted to this one. I believe Miss Vandeleur is only a little less in the dark. I will now bring her, reminding you beforehand how desirable it is that your meeting be as brief as possible.'

As he moved away, Stephen tried to prepare himself by more than his usual attitude of careless indifference; but whether to assume the old half jesting tone, with which she was so familiar before their unhappy parting, or in respect of her suffering at the time, and the remembrance of which might still hang about her, observe a quiet seriousness

more befitting also to his own feeling, he felt too confused to decide.

He wondered if they were engaged. Lord Harlaxton, he thought, if they had been, would have said so to prevent all possible recurrence on his (Stephen's) part to his former relations with Miss Vandeleur.

And then there came over him the recollection of the affair with the sergeant, and the instantaneous resolve to make the meeting shorter even than Lord Harlaxton expected it to be. With such a frightful danger overhanging, his first care must be to hurry her and the earl away, before anything fresh could happen!

His thoughts stopped suddenly in mid-career. Lord Harlaxton came with Miss Vandeleur, who was accompanied by her maid, both dressed in black, and deeply veiled.

The latter, in obedience to a silent intimation from her mistress, retired to wait out of sight; and Lord Harlaxton, then addressing Miss Vandeleur, said,—

'You wish to speak to my brother alone?'

Miss Vandeleur lifted her veil before answering,—

'I must do so. Not, believe me, of my own choice, but as obeying the express instructions of the countess.'

'You wont forget the shortness of the time?' he added, taking out his watch. 'We are late now.'

'I will remember,' briefly said Miss Vandeleur.

Short as this dialogue was, simple and seemingly unimportant as it may appear, Stephen was deeply affected by it. Not only because her presence, the very sound of her voice, brought back in the most vivid manner every incident of their last meeting at Gualtmore, and the eventful preceding separation in London; but brought also, he hardly knew how, a consciousness of some change in her, the nature of which he could not guess, but which perplexed him greatly, and which he felt a strong desire to understand.

Under this impulse he was when she began to speak; and it presently became so powerful as to make him forget nearly everything else.

When Lord Harlaxton had gone, she turned towards Stephen, and he advanced respectfully to meet her.

Holding out her hand, while a gentle smile, which Stephen felt to be inexpressibly sweet, passed over her features, which were altogether more sedate in their expression than he had known them before, she said,—

'We meet as friends, I hope?'

'Let this answer you!' responded Stephen, grasping her fingers in deep but glad emotion.

'I fear you must have thought it strange when you saw me, and perhaps your mother at Gaultmore, that we should have undertaken this long journey and voyage, wretched sailors that we both are, even though under the kindly care of Lord Harlaxton?'

'When unexpected comforts do come, I am not inclined to ask Heaven reproachfully the why and the wherefore,' said Stephen; recovering rapidly his spirits the moment the long burden of self-reproach seemed taken away by her sweet behaviour.

'I am glad to find you have not quite lost your old gaiety of heart,' said Miss Vandeleur; who was equally influenced by his tones, looks, and attitude to put aside the first embarrassment of the meeting.

'Say my old assumed gaiety — which had as little of heart as of truth!' he replied. And then he paused for a moment, as if fearing to be on dangerous ground, but soon swept aside the scruples that hindered him in a plain duty, to say, 'Miss Vandeleur, I thank God you have come, if it be only that I may apologise for the brutal lines I allowed myself to write, no matter under what real or fancied provocation.'

'It is perhaps hardly a topic to be again referred to,' said Miss Vandeleur, in tones of tremulous music; 'nor could I do so, but for two reasons—the one that I have so earnestly wished you might know how all that was most painful in the incident has passed entirely from my—'

Stephen could not help interrupting her to say,—

'This is indeed an unexpected, an inexpressible relief!'

'The other,' continued Miss Vandeleur, 'is that I have since found a soul of good in what seemed so much the reverse.'

'I do not—cannot—deserve such sweet, such generous magnanimity!' cried Stephen, in deepening emotion.

'It was as if I had been wandering in some primrose path, heedless as a child of the near precipice, seeking only food for mirth and joyous excitements, and then was suddenly waked as from a dream to find myself a woman, stripped of all childhood's excuses—a woman who had yet to learn all that it most needed her to know.'

She stopped, turned a little aside, as if to recover herself before she could again speak.

'Such a revelation can only be received in silence, and with the most profound respect,' said Stephen.

But his voice revealed how infinitely beyond anything his words expressed was the effect of the revelation upon him.

Mastering herself at last, and again able to smile, she continued, in a lighter vein,—

'But I hardly know whether it is I who

have to forgive you, or you to forgive me, for being so tardy in acknowledging my debt.'

The smile and the words were alike enchanting to the listener, who said,—

'Let me then hasten to seal so profitable, if one-sided, a bargain of mutual forgiveness, before you can retreat,' said Stephen, as he lifted her hand, and pressed it to his lips. 'I know now we are indeed friends.'

'And now, Stephen, as we must quickly separate—' began Miss Vandeleur, trying to veil her agitation under a show of quiet friendliness,—

But Stephen interrupted her:

'Pardon me. Give me a few moments to speak of my present position and motives in coming here. If not for your own satisfaction, then for my mother's, and if you please, for my brother's.'

'Yes,' was the faint response.

'Where you and he find me, I came as a private soldier. He calls it a freak, and does not think it a creditable one. Permit me then to explain. After I left home, on that sad day of March, I found myself

confronted with a hard problem. I had no money, no friends that I could or would think of appealing to. What then was I to do? I knew not. Not a very cheerful prospect, you'll own, for my future.'

He smiled in saying this, and Miss Vandeleur smiled in response, as she said,—

'No, indeed!' but beneath the smiles both were painfully conscious how different was the true feeling.

'But brilliant in comparison with the worthlessness of my past life. In sheer weariness and disgust I had often wished that it would somehow be broken up, but lacked the courage to initiate the work.

'Now I had to question myself in a sterner fashion. Was I, as men said, a mere butterfly, content so long as I found plenty of life's sunshine to bask in. Or was I, as others described me, a cynic, who tried to forget his own follies in laughing at the follies of the people around me?

'The answer was appalling. It told me that while the very possibility of indulgence and enjoyment from such sources

had gone to wreck, nothing seemed left behind in compensation.'

'Nothing?' queried Miss Vandeleur, with touching earnestness and incredulity, that went home to Stephen's heart.

'So I felt or believed,' he rejoined.

'Conscience, as I have lately found, can be a stern judge,' said Miss Vandeleur. 'But does it not sometimes blind our eyes, as the sculptor's fillet blinds the eyes of Justice in our courts of law, so that nothing may be seen of those redeeming elements which friends knew well to exist?'

'Ah!' said Stephen, in answer, 'but is not Justice properly so blinded that she may not see what is put into her scales, nor by whom, and so decide without bias?'

A strange little laugh broke from Miss Vandeleur at this moment, whether at the oddity of the episodical topic they had fallen upon, or merely as an impulse of relief from the overcharged heart and brain, the reader must judge.

'Oh, Stephen, did you think of all this, when you set your conscience so unkindly to work?' There Miss Vandeleur stopped;

a change passed over her face, and when she spoke again it was to say, 'But Lord Harlaxton will be impatient!'

'I know, and will hasten. Born in the lap of luxury, trained in its habits, denied by my mother's fond indulgence the vigorous corrective of a public school, to be followed by the activity and interest of a public career, I had now to earn my daily bread, accept all kinds of hardships and humiliations, and while doing this know that I could at any moment end all by returning home.

'I knew well that I could play no such heroic part. Neither could I descend to the shame of such a return. Again I asked myself, what could I do? The army had been from boyhood a fancy of mine; but then it was a part of the fancy I should enter with all the advantages of the officer's rank and duties—and then move upwards step by step, till even the glories of Wellington and Marlborough should grow dim by the side of my great victories over half the world.

'You laugh, and no wonder, as I have many a time since then laughed at my own

folly, but such was the boy's vision; and it came back unpleasantly and inconveniently when I, a man, found myself contemplating an entrance into the ranks of warriors by such a very humble door for entry as that by the recruiting sergeant.

'That would be roughing it indeed. And the idea of being thus obliged to rough it, was at first disagreeable, then interested me, and at last fascinated me, as men are said to be somewhat fascinated by very ugly women. I should be no longer troubled about the disposal of myself. *That* would be effectually cared for. I enlisted. I am here!'

'So I see!' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, and she laughed excitedly; then abruptly stopped as she caught sight of Stephen's grave and wondering, but also sympathetically anxious face. 'You are shocked that I can laugh at such a story. Forgive me; it is the first time I have laughed for many a day!'

And then she burst into a passionate fit of tears, which she vainly strove to conceal by covering her face with her hands, and

struggling to repress the agitation which shook her so violently.

'Dear Miss Vandeleur,' said Stephen, hardly knowing or caring what he was about to say, in his deep feeling and sympathy with her state, but she hurriedly interfered,—

'I am ashamed so to have forgotten myself!'

'It is I who have forgotten or been shamefully blind to your nobler self, as I begin to understand it through every look, word, and act. Is it permissible to say now, with my whole heart and soul, what I was once before about to say in lip-worship merely, Frances, I—'

He had neither the opportunity nor need to finish the sentence; his attitude, look, the tenderness of his voice, and kindling glow on his cheek, all warned Miss Vandeleur of what he was about to say, and which in great trouble and distress she instantly stopped.

'No, no. I thought you knew! I thought Lord Harlaxton must have told you.'

'What? That you are engaged to him?'

'Yes,' she said, bending low her head, to avoid his piercing, stern glance.

He dropped the hand that he had been holding, and moved away, so that she no longer was able to see his face.

'Forgive me! I have been very foolish and weak. But your story so deeply interested and moved me, that—'

'Why did you come here?' asked Stephen passionately. 'The blow under any circumstances might be hard to bear; but if you chose so to act, that it had to be borne in any case—' Then stopping abruptly for a few seconds, he added, 'But 'tis no matter. I am silenced!'

'But your attitude does not allow me to be silent too!'

'We can have nothing more to say to each other. I have already been tempted to say a great deal too much!'

'Tempted?' asked Miss Vandeleur, with flashing eyes.

'If the word displeases you, I will take it back.'

'No!' she cried. 'I love better a true speech, even if indiscreet, than a false speech, designed to cover a

cowardly desire for safety. I claim to defend myself in my engagement with your brother.'

'I was wrong to seem to impeach it; doubly wrong to allow you to see how the knowledge of it affected me. At all events I have only committed myself,' urged Stephen.

'And so imposed a duty on me.' Here all the anger and sense of injustice died away, and in gentle, sweet tones she continued, 'Stephen, we are relations—we must be friends—must therefore respect each other. The future were too dreadful for me to look at in any other aspect. For some time after your departure I sank so low in my own esteem that I needed some external aid to raise me. Lord Harlaxton's delicacy in ignoring the cause of the trouble that he could not but see; his constant care and kindness in ministering to my possible wants or desires; the unfailing respect that was as a balm to a still rankling sore; these were things to feel and be grateful for, but they were not all. He had been often bitter about you before, never since. On the contrary,

he more than once expressed an earnest wish to aid you to an honourable, that might prove if you chose (these were *his* words) a distinguished, career. At last he spoke in a manner that admitted of no mistake. But in doing so he conjured me before answering to consult with my best friend, that is to say, the countess. To that I consented—I fear somewhat disingenuously—for I thought—indeed I felt sure—that I knew beforehand what she would say. I was mistaken. In great depression of spirits she advised me to accept. What she hoped, she said, she would hope no longer—' (here Miss Vandeleur paused, then spoke slowly as if troubled to find suitable words to express the substance of the rest of the countess's sentence)—'after your departure, your prolonged absence, and your silence to us all. She ended with a remark that was inexplicable to me, but that sank deep. She said I might by so acting be the means of a permanent reconciliation between the brothers. That, and that alone, decided me.'

It was with difficulty, and in a broken

voice only, that Stephen found power to answer,—

'You have nobly justified yourself. Would that I could say it leaves me happier!'

'And now, Stephen,' said Miss Vandeleur with a forced smile, and a slight recurrence to her former gaiety of manner, as seeing how he was affected, and herself no less deeply the while, 'I should be all that I feared you still thought me, when I came here, if I did not say this must be our last word on such a subject for evermore.'

'It shall be so!' rejoined Stephen, 'unless—'

But she interrupted him.

'There can be no such unless!' Pausing a moment or two, she then said, 'You will of course leave the army the earliest moment you can?'

'No,' was the reply. 'I have passed through the worst—at least I hope so,' he added hurriedly, as he remembered his new danger; and with that remembered what he had so entirely forgotten in the interest and excitement of the meeting

with Miss Vandeleur—the necessity of hurrying her and his brother away before anything could happen. So he purposely endeavoured to close all he would have liked to say, in a very few words. 'I shall work for a commission, and then return to my family and friends, no longer ashamed to meet them.'

'Oh, Stephen, if what your major said to Lord Harlaxton, as we came here, be true, you have already achieved in the humblest capacity, a distinguished and honourable record! And is not that a truer glory than if you had done as much in a higher rank and capacity?'

'Perhaps only a mere flash in the pan!' remarked Stephen. 'But we shall see. I have again to ask forgiveness for so much talk about myself, while I have only just called to mind that my brother waits, and that you have some message to deliver from my mother.'

Gentleman Jack with his usual inquisitiveness, which meant his usual desire to make eavesdropping profitable, no matter in what way, had passed by twice before

while this interview was proceeding, which deeply interested, and greatly puzzled him.

He now again came by, and in so doing caught the last words, and at once found a hiding-place in a hut close by, the door of which being open, had been glanced into by Stephen, as he was about to meet Miss Vandeleur, and who turned away satisfied it was empty.

'Yes.'

'She did not know of my being at Gualtmore?'

'No one knew—or knows from me.'

'How then did you learn?'

'From a soldier in your own regiment who read the advertisement—knew you, and then learning we were at Gualtmore, wrote to the countess, claiming the reward.'

'Oh yes, I understand!' ejaculated Stephen. 'Excuse my interruption.'

'The countess being herself too ill to seek you in person, and in such a scene, so earnestly requested me to take her place, that I could not refuse; for she had already won a reluctant assent from Lord Harlaxton. She would not write even for me to bring the letter, in fear of accidents.

'I may not remember her precise words, but I am sure of the substance, for she repeated them a second time. "Tell Stephen," she said, 'that his vocation, and whereabouts having at last become known through a letter from the person that calls himself Gentleman Jack, and who will presently receive from the solicitors the promised reward, I have applied to the Horse Guards for his discharge; so that at the earliest possible moment he may come to me to receive a communication of the highest interest and importance to him personally."'

Miss Vandeleur tried to say this in a tone of comparative indifference, so as to attract no attention to the thoughts and feelings which were consciously excited within her by the words she had to deliver.

She was not very successful, for Stephen was the listener. And she still more decidedly failed in her determined purpose of seeming equanimity in what remained to be said.

'And that I charge him to keep absolutely unknown to any but himself and you the

nature of this message, which Lord Harlaxton will consider to be springing simply from my natural desire for Stephen's society.'

'Can you throw any light on the subject of what she has to say,? inquired Stephen.

'None whatever!' responded Miss Vandeleur, hurriedly, and with an excitment that neither his question nor her answer appeared to suggest or justify.

'And nothing would have induced me to bring such a message, but my conviction that if I refused, the countess would herself, no matter at what risk, have endeavoured to come to you.'

'She has known, at least, how to send a messenger whom I cannot gainsay. Tell her, then, I will return the moment I can. Where shall I find her?'

'At Lord Harlaxton's marine villa on the Devonshire coast.'

'And where, I presume, you will all be?'

'No doubt,' replied Miss Vandeleur.

And then, becoming more and more conscious of her own agitation, and strug-

gling bravely to keep it down, she said to him, as again she tried to smile,—

'Well, we have had a long talk, and Lord Harlaxton has been so indulgent that I must now wish you good-bye;' and she held out her hand.

Taking and holding it, Stephen said to her, in accents and words of measured strength, and tender, earnest, and profound respect,—

'Whatever the future may have in store for either of us, I shall feel henceforth, and profit by the knowledge, that I have not lived so entirely in vain as I thought, for I have known you.'

He stooped, kissed her hand, and turned away.

Lord Harlaxton, who had been getting impatient, had moved by degrees nearer, but still waited for the natural close of the interview. Then, again stepping a few yards further, he saw the separation of the two, and hurried on. As he came to them, Miss Vandeleur said,—

'I was just coming to you. I am ready.'

And there they separated, Stephen and

Lord Harlaxton not exchanging a single word, hardly even a glance of recognition.

Two minutes later, while Stephen stood motionless watching their departure, and retracing in thought the ground he had gone over with Miss Vandeleur, he was suddenly confronted by a guard of soldiers under the command of Sergeant Grabbe, who, turning to his men, said,—

'There is your prisoner!'

'Thank God!' ejaculated Stephen inwardly, 'they have been spared even the knowledge of this matter, much less the sight.'

The soldiers opened out, and Stephen took his place between them, his face pale as death, but calm and silent. And then the soldiers marched off with their prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII.

'I HAVE LOST ALL THROUGH THE FOLLY—THE MADNESS OF A MOMENT.'

FOR some time after the arrest Stephen's mental state can be described by no other word than that of stupefaction.

The incidents that led to it had fallen so suddenly — so unexpectedly — as to confound him for the time. But still there was hope the sergeant might, on reflection, accept his apology; and to avoid discovery of his own breach of rule, let the matter drop.

And then the affair was all but driven from his mind by the appearance of Miss Vandeleur, with the earl; and by the all-

absorbing conversation he had held with her, ending in his promise to go to his mother in a short time in obedience to her urgent summons, if he could.

And now that was settled for him! He was a prisoner, and on his way to the guard-room.

Is it any wonder if his brain seemed to reel at the chaos of wild, agonising thought in which he was plunged; and that to repel the incoming of madness he accepted nature's kindly anodyne—dulled sensibility—and tried not to think as the best way not to feel.

Yet even in the brief journey to the guard-room how every object he met or passed seemed to have changed its character, and, like the sky itself, to have put on a sort of angry, lurid aspect.

He sat down in the guard-room and waited mechanically for what was to happen next.

He glanced round at the soldiers there, but shunned notice of any particular face; and then crossing his arms upon his breast, and letting his eyes rest on the floor, he summed up the position in the words,—

'I have lost all through the folly—the madness of a moment!'

Presently he was conducted to his room, and ordered to consider himself a prisoner there among his usual companions, who included a sergeant and ten privates.

The respect thus paid to him as a non-commissioned officer, brought a rush of fearful emotion; as once more reminding him of how hard had been his fight to achieve that first step, which foretokened all the rest of the steps by which he was to work out his redemption; and it was some time before he could again cover himself with the pall of oblivion that he now courted as his only remaining method of escape from self-torture.

But courted in vain for any length of time. Remembrances he was striving to keep off, would not be so dealt with. Again he heard the drummers at their work, as on the day of his quarrel with the sergeant; again he was asking Gentleman Jack the meaning of their strange unearthly noises; again he received the reply, they were preparing to flog some miserable wretch; and again he had

to remind himself the man's offence resembled his own; and that the merciless character of the commander as a 'flogging colonel,' which Gentleman Jack described, rendered his escape as unlikely as that of the man for whom the drummers had been preparing, and who had passed through their hands, reeking with his blood.

The thought was horrible. Death itself a soldier may cheerfully face, but not punishment so cruel, and so irredeemably infamous.

Again the words were in his heart and almost on his lips, but with an addition:— 'I have lost all through the folly—the madness of a moment—why then not accept the fact as irrevocable; and stifle as it springs every thought of the past, every hope of the future, and seek that way the only possible rest, by myself so knocking at the gates of Death that he will not refuse me?'

CHAPTER IX.

THE SERGEANT'S CHARGE.

STEPHEN'S crime having been duly put into official form by Sergeant Grabbe, as that of 'wilfully striking him in the face with his clenched fist, and so knocking him down,' the prisoner was next morning marched by the regimental orderly sergeant before his colonel.

There the crime, as officialised, was read out to him, and then the colonel asked him what he had to say to the charge.

Stephen acknowledged, with the deepest regret, it was true; adding he had instantly done all he could to satisfy the sergeant that it was entirely unpremeditated, and to humbly apologise for the deed.

'Hum! Ha!' ejaculated the colonel, giving Stephen one of those furtive half-aside glances that told those who knew him the prisoner need look for no favour at his hands.

Stephen saw that glance, remembered his first impressions of the colonel when he had seen and heard him that night on the packet, when they were both on their way from Holyhead to Dublin, and took it as a fresh monition to abandon hope, and cherish blank, dull despair.

The interview closed with the remand of the prisoner, to be tried by a district court-martial; the authority for which had to be obtained from the General commanding the Curragh Brigade.

This was duly given in the next four days, and the colonel was then free to act.

Accordingly next day there appeared in the regimental orders a statement to the effect that, by order of the General commanding the Curragh Brigade, Stephen Shand would be tried by a district court-martial, assembled in the Court-Martial Room, F square, at eleven a.m., on the

9th of January 1867, for his trial, and for the trial of such other prisoners as might be brought before it.

While events were thus hurrying on to their natural or unnatural conclusion, Stephen, the unhappy prisoner, whom they so deeply concerned, was no longer in the state of passive misery which at first so overwhelmed him.

That look of the colonel—which, for the moment, increased Stephen's own sense of the hopelessness of any efforts for safety —in the end aided greatly to restore him to himself, to his fortitude, to his courage; to, in a word, a determined purpose of fighting manfully this new combat imposed upon him; and if he must fail, do something in the process which should incline men to think he ought to have succeeded.

Yes, that would be something. And as to the process itself—would not that be better a thousand times than simply sitting in a corner staring blankly at the ceiling of his room, when his comrades were on parade; or stalking to and fro

in frames of mind that sometimes brought home to him in an odd mixture of humour and anguish the thought—he was about to walk away from all his difficulties.

But the stupor had thoroughly passed away, even before the occurrence of a new incident, that certainly was quite sufficient to prevent its return.

This was a visit from Major Etheredge. And the two being presently left alone, the major shook Stephen by the hand before speaking a word.

The act was magical. Tears sprang into the young man's face.

'Come,' said the major, 'let us sit down and have a little talk together. Have you begun your defence?'

'No,' said Stephen, half ashamed.

'How is that?' asked the major, gravely. 'No time should be lost in such matters.'

'I must confess to a most unmanly and prolonged mood,' said Stephen. 'But it was ended before you came. I am spared that shame,' he said, with a smile.

'Glad to hear you say so. But I think

I understand how you have been overwhelmed, and I cannot wonder. But let all that pass.'

The major then got Stephen to narrate, in the minutest detail, the particulars of the quarrel with the sergeant; and so became acquainted with the sergeant's breach of rules, which seemed to interest him greatly.

'I almost wonder that such a fact and your instantaneous apology did not induce the sergeant to be silent.'

'That was my hope after he had left me, but, as you see, a fallacious one,' responded Stephen.

'There is a vindictiveness in some men that no sense of what is prudent, no wise selfishness can moderate, till it has been satisfied in its own ferocious way,' said the major thoughtfully.

'Yes,' said Stephen, 'that is the danger with the sergeant. Besides, I doubt not he can find ways to gloss over his fault if it does get known.'

'You will want me as a witness, of course,' continued the major, after a few moments of silence.

'It is an honour I greatly covet, and I fear as greatly need.'

'You are entitled to it in every way. I shall testify to your character both as a soldier and a man ever since you joined the camp. I shall point to your services with the flying column; and lastly, to my own individual debt to you in the affair of the treacherous spies.'

'I shall be most grateful, major, whatever may subsequently happen.'

'By-the-bye, bring all this out by questions to me. Don't let me play too much the part of a volunteer.'

'I understand, major, and will take care to do so,' said Stephen.

'Would it not be well to inform your friends?'

'That is the one thing in the world I desire should not be done!' exclaimed Stephen passionately. 'I may escape, or with but that kind of punishment which will leave no stigma behind. But if the worst were to come, there could be for me one only consolation — the infamy would be unknown to them, and would for ever remain unknown; for at the

earliest possible period I would obtain my discharge, and then seek in eternal exile some possibilities of forgetfulness of such a past, and of hope for a better future!'

'Well, I regret your determination; I cannot think it wise, but neither can I wonder at it. Well, now, for a couple of suggestions:

'Prepare a written defence, as powerful as you can, but not long. Avoid, if you possibly can, compelling Sergeant Grabbe to own that late night-gossip with the woman. If he denies giving you the lie, you will have no choice. You must then show his motive for anger, and for so falling foul on you. But short of that, I would keep as well with him as you can; his testimony may be more or less strong just as he sees you spare him or press him on that point.'

'I will certainly do, major, exactly what you advise. It is counsel which entirely commends itself to my own judgment.'

'Now then to say good-bye!' And the major rose, and again shook hands with Stephen; whose heart was so painfully

full of grateful feeling that he could not venture to let it try to express itself in any other shape than by the warm, retentive clasp, and the reluctant resignation of the major's fingers at the door.

CHAPTER X.

PREPARING THE DEFENCE.

NOT one moment did Stephen lose after the departure of the major before beginning the study of his defence.

He began to write as if he thought at once to go straight on and finish it; but soon stopped, confused by the multiplicity of details that even so comparatively simple a case in outline pressed upon his attention.

Abandoning this effort, and tearing up the paper, he now began to jot down those details; heedless of any logical succession but that of the actual order of their occurrence in his mind.

Of course the result was that all the salient points were soon on the paper before him, needing only to be methodically arranged.

In that business of arrangement he stopped every now and then to put into words a thought that struck him; so that when the entire mechanical process had been got through, he was pleased to see he had really made considerable progress towards the actual and final defence.

Interruptions unfortunately were many through the sympathy and the gossip of his comrades of the same rank in the same room; who in their kindly feeling for Stephen made it a point to report to him any anecdotes of the business of the day that were likely to interest him; while he on his part could not but put a good face on the matter, and listen and bear in patient good humour the delays they caused.

But the moment they were gone he hurried back to his little table and his papers, and did his best to resume without loss the theme they had interrupted.

And so at last a rough version was completed of all he had thought to say. But not until this had been re-written (always with additions, and corrections, and improvements), some six times, did he feel his work was done.

And then, remembering the major's injunction about brevity, he saw with dismay that much of what he had done he had now to undo.

Cutting out remorselessly 'long passages that led to nothing' but the expression of his own individual feeling, to begin with; he did not stop there. Choice phrases, telling passages, forcible displays of fact, had now all to be subjected to a severe revision.

And only when these things were done did he make a fair copy—one, indeed, that was so beautifully written as to suggest, apart from the internal evidence of the matter, that only a gentleman could have written it.

He recognised that fact with a certain satisfaction; believing that his judges could not be so destitute of feeling for one of their own social rank originally, as not to be a little influenced to kindly consideration of his act, and therefore to merciful treatment.

He put the document, carefully folded to an official shape, in his pocket; and from that moment waited with a sense of growing hope and confidence, he had not been able to feel before.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

THE very next day Stephen was summoned before his judges.

About 10·45 of the clock he was marched to the Court-Martial Room, wearing his usual dress and a shako, but without belts. The sergeant, his accuser, entered with him.

At the head of a long table sat the colonel as president, having two other officers of the regiment sitting on each side, equally divided between captains and subalterns. The adjutant, who acted as prosecutor, stood a little apart; while the major stood by the window.

Stephen and the sergeant took their places, standing at the bottom of the table.

After a respectful salute at his entrance, Stephen ventured to glance at the faces of his judges; all of course known to him, but now invested with a new and terrible interest in his eyes, as being the men selected for this dread tribunal.

He had indulged in frequent speculations beforehand on this critical point, and had hoped that certain men would, and other certain men would not, be chosen; but now he knew, and the knowledge was to the last degree unsatisfactory.

However, he could not afford to dwell on such a topic; and he did not. But strove by calmness—careful thought—slow considerate speaking when he should have to speak, so to pass through the ordeal as to have nothing wherewith to reproach himself hereafter.

Diverting his thoughts to the court and its forms, he was struck by one peculiarity, the entire absence of any display of the tremendous force in the background.

He himself was in no way personally degraded. No file of men had brought him hither, only the orderly-sergeant of the regiment. He was not handcuffed.

No sentry was on guard. The officers wore their swords as a part of their uniform, and there was present a single court-orderly. That was all.

The proceedings began by the president reading the formal orders, which gave the court authority to act in the case of Stephen Shand; and then, addressing the prisoner, he said,—

'Do you object to be tried by me, or by any other member of the court?'

'No, sir,' was Stephen's reply, in a clear, distinct voice.

Then the four members took the Bible in their right hands across the table, and were sworn in to duly try the prisoner now before them, without favour, partiality, or affection, according to the evidence brought before them, and in accordance with the custom of war.

Stephen, be it observed parenthetically, could not but notice how carefully the words chosen—'without favour, partiality, or affection,' bore all against the prisoner; while none accompanied them, as a safeguard against the opposite tendencies of official bias, personal dislike, or the many

forms in which oppression on the part of a superior might have created the crime charged against an inferior.

The words indeed seemed precisely fitted to injure a case like his own—where some such feelings might be expected to rise in the breast of the judges, when they had the whole fairly before them; and which they were thus warned not to give way to.

Stephen tried to discover the equity of this, but was not successful. What favour, partiality, or affection could be expected in the heart of an officer, on the trial of a man so far below him, with whom he had nothing in common but the vocation, unless such feelings had been due to what they knew of his character and conduct in the regiment. And in that case, should they not have been esteemed as perfectly legitimate elements in the final result?

While these thoughts were passing through Stephen's mind, the president was being similarly sworn in by the senior captain.

That done, Sergeant Grabbe and other

possible witnesses retired, and the president read out the charge against Stephen, which was to the effect—

'That he, to the prejudice and good order of military discipline, at the Curragh Camp, on the 1st of January 1866, did wilfully and maliciously strike in the face, with his clenched fist, Sergeant Grabbe, the same being his superior officer.'

'Are you guilty or not guilty?' Stephen was now asked.

'I am guilty of the act; I am not guilty of all that is implied in the words—"wilfully and maliciously."'

'You must plead one way or the other. The words are not at your disposal to add or to alter.' Then, after a pause, the colonel added, in a seemingly kinder spirit,—'I advise you to plead "Not guilty."'

'Then, sir, I thankfully accept!'

Therewith he pleaded not guilty, and the president recorded the fact.

The one and only witness for the prosecution was then called in—the sergeant who had been struck. He walked up the long room, and placed himself at the

right of the president, and was by him duly sworn.

He then, in very few words, but in a hard, unsympathetic voice, narrated his story in this fashion: He was standing in conversation with the prisoner, complaining of matters that he thought tended to disturb the peace of the regiment, when suddenly he was struck with such violence, that he fell to the ground. He rose, and then the prisoner expressed his sorrow, and the sergeant left him to call the guard.

All this was duly written down by the president, and read out to the sergeant to have the correctness of the record duly verified.

'Have you any questions to put to the witness?' asked the president.

'Yes, sir,' replied Stephen, and began at once his cross-examination.

'I think, sergeant, it was through your advice I entered the regiment, when you found me wandering in the camp?'

'Yes,' said the sergeant.

'Have we, prior to the last few weeks,

ever had a single quarrel, or anything approaching to one?'

'Not that I remember.'

'But within these few weeks, have you not changed in your manner to me; I do not say without occasion—I simply ask as to the fact of the change?'

'Perhaps my opinion may have somewhat changed.'

And that is due, is it not, to the secret incitements of Tommy Atkins?'

'I have talked with him, as well as to other soldiers, as a part of my duty.'

'But in listening to him, should you not have remembered that, in consequence of my having twice defeated him in wrestling, he had not disguised from his comrades his hatred of me, and his wish to do me an ill turn? And now, sergeant, to what all this leads: Has he not done me this ill turn, in bringing reports to you from time to time, which you believed to my discredit; and which led up to the conversation you spoke of; when for the first time you gave me the opportunity to challenge one of these reports, and I gave it an indignant denial. Is not that true?'

'You did deny something or other that I had to say to you.'

'And then you told me I lied?'

'I don't think I used so strong an expression, but something equivalent, I daresay, was said.'

'And on the instant of the utterance of the phrase, which was,—"It's a d—d lie!" the blow was struck?'

'The blow was struck—that was enough for me!'

'I think so too,' said the president. 'Prisoner, you will hardly benefit yourself by entering into these small details.'

'But, sir, I entreat you to observe,' said Stephen, with earnest but respectful manner, 'it is only by these small details I can show how the sergeant was provoked against (as I firmly believe) his own better nature to call me a liar, and so to give the provocation that led to the blow.'

One of the captains here handed to the president a paper, containing no doubt a suggested question; for the latter, after a momentary pause, asked Stephen,—

'What was the nature of the complaint

or charge made by the sergeant which you say you so indignantly repudiated?'

That was a critical moment for our hero. Could he avoid frankly repeating what the sergeant had said when the matter was so put to him? And yet the major's advice was perhaps more necessary than ever to be acted on.

He took a medium course.

'Well, sir, the sergeant's charge against me was not really a matter of military duty at all; it was simply the repetition of a tale told to him by a contemptible go-between, who wanted to create bad blood. I would prefer to say nothing about it. The sergeant acknowledges in effect all I wanted to prove—that no neglect of my duties caused the sergeant to question me; that the informer who misled him was Tommy Atkins; that the sergeant did call me a liar; and I, in the anger of the moment, responded by the offence that has unhappily brought me here. I have nothing more to ask of the sergeant, who has given his evidence fairly.'

There was something in the low buzz

of conversation amongst the members of the court-martial, and in the look of their faces, that told of a success being scored.

The sergeant perfectly understood what Stephen was doing; and though he did not by look or sign manifest the relief he felt at finding he was not to be exposed, he took care to run no risk by farther speaking; and withdrew the moment he was permitted to do so.

To Stephen's great surprise, and still more serious alarm, the president now closed the court, before any examination of the witnesses for the prisoner, the latter having been marched out, and only the adjutant left with the court.

Nor in answer to his anxious and hurried questions from the orderly under whose charge he was, could he feel much re-assured in being told his witnesses would be heard; but only after the court-martial had decided the question whether he was or was not guilty of the crime charged against him.

Once more the sense of injustice burned fiercely in Stephen's heart. Assuming the

witnesses yet to be heard were only witnesses to character, was not character in Stephen's case an all-important element in determining the amount and quality of his crime?

But he could only wait and summon up whatever of latent fortitude there might be in his soul, to bear the impending verdict, which he began seriously to fear would be a fatal one.

On the re-opening of the court, the president called upon Stephen to say whatever he wished to say in defence or extenuation of his behaviour.

Stephen saw now the whole position. If they had found him 'Not guilty,' of course the proceedings would have ended there and then.

They had then found him guilty, he, and his witnesses alike unheard!

Revolting at what he conceived to be the monstrous injustice of such a method of trial, he determined to throw overboard the defence he had so laboriously prepared, and speak freshly, as he felt, without note or paper to aid him.

Rash as the step may seem, he had still

glanced at that aspect of it, and satisfied himself. As they had already found him 'Guilty,' he had little or nothing to fear in that direction; while a few manly, outspoken words might, with the aid of his witnesses, seriously affect the character of the sentence. Not caring to inquire or speculate any farther, he made his plunge boldly.

'I could have wished, sir, you and the members of this honourable court might have heard what my witnesses had to say, before entering on the—to me—momentous question of my guilt, or my freedom from it.

'For, sir, I think, when you do hear their evidence, you will find convincing proof that the very essence of the charge against me—wilful malice—is contradicted by the whole tenor of my life in the camp.

'I must own that this procedure, which I did not know of beforehand, and which I had never thought to inquire about, disarranges all my plans of defence.

'I hold here, sir, in my hand, a paper prepared with the greatest care, but

written throughout in the belief that I was appealing to still unpledged judges; and was, therefore, shaping my course so to influence them by appeals to their judgment derived from a dispassionate review of the facts that I might hope, at least, to be understood; and that point gained, I felt I ought to leave all to your honourable court in quiet confidence.

'That paper is now useless for the purpose for which it was written. But I venture humbly but most earnestly to ask that it be taken by you, to be preserved with the other records of this trial, as my only sufficient and deliberate defence. It may be a satisfaction to my friends, to be able at some future time, to see my own statement of my case, side by side with your judgment.'

Therewith he handed the document to the nearest of the officers, a subaltern; who, after a moment's hesitation, handed it to his neighbour, who placed it before the president. He glanced at it carelessly, laid it down, and then,—

'Prisoner,' said the president in his harshest, most discordant tones, 'do you

ask this as a veiled threat to the court, on account of what you may imagine the court will do, or not do?'

'God forbid, sir! There was no such thought in my heart. I am separated by my own act from my friends, who are not without influence. But I have kept all knowledge of my position from them. I shall still do the same. See then, sir, what that has involved, my putting all my trust in a fair trial here!

'But can this trial be so called if I am first found guilty of wilful and malicious intention on the evidence of a single man, —and that the man who received the offence; while I believe, after hearing my witnesses, you will see how strong is the presumption that I could not have premeditated any kind of violence; and how contradictory the proofs will appear as to my having felt anything approaching to malice, when I struck in defence of outraged honour.

'"Outraged honour!" These are perhaps unwise words, but they reveal a truth. I am a gentleman by birth, by education, by culture, by everything that

could tend to make such an outrage on me as the being called a liar one to be resented without forethought, without time for any kind of prudent or wise reflection to interpose a restraining force.

'That, sir, is and must be my essential defence. If you, as gentlemen, cannot listen to that after hearing my witnesses, it will be useless for me to say more.

'Thanking you all gratefully for the indulgence you have shown to one who is painfully conscious he has not been able to speak as he so earnestly desired, in harmony with the customs and traditions of the court, I have now only to call my witnesses.'

The adjutant having first testified to Stephen's length of service and to his good character, the next to give evidence was the sergeant-major.

'Do you remember,' so ran Stephen's question to him, 'that I ever on any occasion told on my own authority, or repeated tales to you from others likely to prejudice Sergeant Grabbe in your estimate of him?'

'Never! And speaking from ample knowledge, I can only say that I know no man in the regiment so unlikely to do anything of the kind to injure a comrade.'

'And yet I believe Sergeant Grabbe has allowed you to see he had got that impression of me?'

'Yes, I think so. I cannot else understand various remarks that have at different times dropped from him.'

'That is all I wish to ask you, sergeant-major.'

But here the inquisitive captain again interposed a little paper; in consequence of which the president asked the sergeant-major,—

'Can you tell us the nature of the charge made by Sergeant Grabbe to the prisoner which led to the lie being given as alleged by the prisoner, and to the subsequent violence which is not, and cannot be, denied?'

'No, sir, I know nothing about it.'

And then the sergeant-major was allowed to go away, and Major Etheredge proffered himself for examination.

'Have I, major, been a fairly good

soldier, and subjected to no punishments since I first came under your command?'

'You have never been punished. A better soldier in all respects, up to this sad business, I never expect to see.'

'Had I the good fortune to be of service in the riots of last autumn when I went out under your command?'

'Your services were of that character that I thought it advisable to call you out on our return home before all the men, and publicly compliment and thank you. The president will find a full account in my report, presented next day to the colonel, his predecessor.'

'I know not,' said Stephen, turning towards the president, 'if the forms of this honourable court permit me to thank the major for evidence so dear to me as a soldier—so precious to me as a man; but if they do, I beg to tender him my most grateful thanks. If anything could lessen the pain, the humiliation of my position, the major has done that for me. Again I thank him!'

These last words were so broken by emotion that every one in court felt them.

'As I find,' said the major, recovering his equanimity and presence of mind for Stephen's sake, 'that the prisoner does not intend to elicit a fact that redounds greatly to his credit as a soldier, I must myself mention it to the court.'

He then described, briefly but picturesquely, the incidents previously shown in connection with the treachery of the scouts; but so described them as to make the result bear rather upon Stephen's skill and decision of character as a soldier at a critical moment, than upon the fact that he owed his own life in all probability to the qualities illustrated. This fact he did not even refer to as a matter affecting himself, knowing the use that might be made of it to weaken his own previous evidence, as that of an uncommonly grateful man!

Stephen was now ordered back to his room, there to ruminate on the business the court had yet to perform, the determination of the sentence, and the sending of the finding of the court to the general in command of the brigade for approval.

CHAPTER XII.

MAJOR ETHEREDGE'S LETTER.

AWFUL, indeed, were the days following, in their agonising suspense; and in the fear, fast growing to a conviction in Stephen's mind, that he must prepare for the worst.

What he might have done to anticipate the worst may be guessed rather than told. But there were two restraining influences. The first was that the very circumstances of his position which made suicide possible—the indulgence shown to him as a non-commissioned officer—made him also think of the consequences thereafter to other unfortunates, if such an act, as he dimly meditated, were seen to be due to

the consideration shown. A sudden stop would certainly be put at once and for ever to any and every indulgence that could be so abused.

The other influence was a letter from Major Etheredge, which ran thus :—

'I have just had an interview with the colonel on two subjects—the one to tell him that I have succeeded in effecting an exchange into a regiment in which I have a brother and other personal friends; news as pleasing to him to hear as I to narrate, for in truth no two men, I think, ever more cordially disliked each other, and were more glad of a separation.

'The other matter related to you. I am supposed not to know the decision of the court, but these things do ooze out somehow, where there is any special desire to know. So I went. I pressed upon him all the points that I thought ought to convince him that while yours was undoubtedly a case for some punishment, it should be of such a nature that, when once passed through, would leave no rankling thoughts or feelings behind. "Punish, but don't ruin," I said, in effect.

'Curiously enough my strongest arguments were those he caught the fastest hold of, but simply to use against me. When I spoke, for example, of the vast difference a punishment may have upon two different men — one a rough, who, when he had been punished and got over the torture, would never trouble his mind by reflecting on its nature, or on his own degradation through it; the other a gentleman, to whom the physical torture, however cruel, would be less frightful than the everlasting sense of infamy that he would be sure to associate with it.

'The colonel listened attentively, smiled, and presently I found he received what I said, as proving he had then another duty to perform besides those he knew of, and that was to show the humblest among his soldiers, their colonel was indeed their father, one who would show equal justice to all. That one illustration may serve for all. I left him convinced there was but one thing to do, and that I am now on the way to London to try to accomplish.

'Before you can possibly receive this, I

shall be on the other side of the Channel, and a few hours later I shall present myself at Harlaxton House, to take counsel with your brother.

'I should not tell you this, but I fear what may be your method of escape if you see no hope in any quarter.

'But no, my friend, you are made of nobler stuff than goes to the making of suicides. Bear up, then. I may fail—God knows I may—but assuredly I will succeed if success be possible. Not, I am well aware, by myself — I am too humble a person; no, not by myself, but by putting others on to the work, of greater, more commanding influence.

'Forgive me, then, my violation of your urgent, your passionate demand, that I should be silent. But whether you do or do not, my duty is the same—to save you if I can; or if I cannot, prove a true friend in the hour of your worst trial, and one who will hope to mitigate consequences by his brotherly sympathy afterwards.

'CHARLES GORDON ETHEREDGE.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DREADFUL DAY.

THE fifth day after the court-martial (no further communication from Major Etheredge having reached the prisoner) an early parade of Stephen's regiment was ordered, every man to be present. Of course the meaning of this quickly spread through the camp, and only did not reach the prisoner, through the kindness of those about him. The sentence of the court-martial on Stephen was then to be read aloud. And the nature of the punishment was made but too plain by the proceedings of the drum-major, who, as head of the drummers, had ordered 'flogging exercise,' which consists in the

skilful practice of flogging bags filled with straw, with the cat o' nine tails.

On the parade being formed up in due order, the commanding officer, the colonel, directed the prisoner, Stephen Shand, to be brought forth from the guard-room, to which he had been previously taken, and where he began to understand he was at the beginning of the end—whatever that end might be.

Bracing his nerves as he best could for the impending publicity, he wondered the while whether the major might not have yet in part succeeded in his mission, but was necessarily acting through the authorities of the regiment. With that one sole faint ray of possible light in his horizon, Stephen was marched to the parade.

And this was the spectacle that met his eyes. Soldiers, his own comrades, formed three sides of a square, in the centre of which was planted the triangle —no doubt for him to be tied to.

Did he at that awful moment look round on the weapons held so near, and dream of the possibility of a sudden rush upon

one of them, and so end defiantly a life that could be no longer worth saving?

Or was he restrained by the thought that even yet the display of intended punishment might not necessarily involve its infliction?

Or was he altogether too confused by the publicity, by the hopelessness of any effective action on his part at so late an hour, and by a last thought he tried to realise and take comfort in, that the infamy was not his, but belonged to the punishment and to the punishers, and therefore he should go through it manfully?

His thoughts, whatever they might be, were stopped by the colonel's loud voice calling the regiment to

'Attention!'

The adjutant then read out a formal document stating the prisoner's crime, and the finding of the court-martial that he was 'Guilty.'

The court, therefore, sentenced No. 1462, Corporal Stephen Shand, to be reduced to the rank and pay of a private, to receive fifty lashes, and further, to be imprisoned with hard labour for a period of 365 days.

Immediately the sergeant-major ordered Stephen to strip, which he did by taking off his shirt, fastening his trousers about his waist, and advancing to the triangle, where the drum-major began to bind him with straps.

The severity of the sentence seemed to Stephen an answer to his own impromptu and ill-judged speech to the court.

At this moment the sergeant-major noticed some confused talking going on near him, and angrily called for

'Silence!'

But he was himself a few seconds later called away by the adjutant, who seemed greatly disturbed; and presently both went to the colonel, who was impatiently waiting to know what all this absurd behaviour meant.

Carefully keeping the matter to themselves, it then transpired that a mistake of an extraordinary nature had been made.

Is it possible to imagine the emotions of Stephen as he became partially aware that something was going on that might or might not relate to himself; but that if not relating to him, could hardly have

been permitted at such a time and place?

For at the very moment of the two joining the colonel, to impart what must plainly be disagreeable news, Stephen was immoveably strapped to the triangle; the drummers, cat in hand, were waiting the signal to begin; while the doctor stood by, holding his watch, to observe the prisoner's state as the punishment went on.

Will Stephen ever forget the break in that terrible silence — when the colonel was heard to order him to be unstrapped, and marched back to the guard-room for the present.

Strange, and yet simple enough, was the forthcoming explanation. The crime was said in all the proceedings to have been committed on a certain day of January in the year 1866. Within the last few minutes, through this public reading on the parade, a sharp listener had discovered there must be a mistake, for he knew well the prisoner had not then entered the regiment; and that, in fact, the offence was committed a year later, the one in which they now were.

He could not help imparting his discovery to a corporal, who told it to a sergeant, and so it reached the sergeant-major.

When the culprit was found, it proved to be the orderly-room clerk, who had been so incessantly engaged writing daily on dozens of papers for the last twelve months the year 1866, that when he came to 1867 he forgot what he was about, and wrote 1866 once more.

How was it the month—January—did not warn him? he was asked. And to that he answered he had been preparing matters for the Horse Guards that had dealt continually with the dates of January and 1866. *

But the day was to be characterised

* This incident of the story is based upon an actual fact. A high authority in such matters, my original informant, now tells me that not only did a man sentenced by court-martial, some twenty years since, escape through a flaw of this kind (though he would not do so now), but that cases were not infrequent of men escaping punishment through technical errors in the procedure; in fact, he adds, this was almost the only chance of escape, so inexorable were the authorities in the due infliction of the sentences given.

by another surprise. It really seemed as if fortune, which had borne so hardly, so mercilessly on Stephen hitherto, had suddenly made up her mind to a great change; and not content with one stroke to relieve our hero, followed it by another, which if not more impressive than the first, for that was impossible, was certainly calculated to be more permanently agreeable to rest on. A telegram reached the colonel only a few hours later than the parade to say the prisoner was pardoned; and that all necessary documents and explanations were in the hands of Major Etheredge, who was on his way to the camp.

Next day he arrived, and placed in the colonel's hands a pardon obtained from the Queen by the countess; who, having received from the major all the particulars, moved Lord Harlaxton to demand an audience, went with him into the royal presence, and so moved the Queen by her narrative of Stephen's story, and the corroborative evidence of Major Etheredge (who waited near), that her fondest wish was gratified. In this narrative the coun-

tess did not—could not—under the circumstances, deal with the secret in which Stephen was so deeply concerned, though at times the temptation to tell all seemed irresistible.

The document from the Horse Guards thus moved into action proved to be very unpleasant reading for the colonel and the other members of the court-martial. In effect it said,—

Recognising the desire of the members of the court-martial to support unflinchingly the idea of discipline; approving their sentence of guilty, and of a consequent punishment; what the authorities fail to understand is how the court, while seeing the enormity of the act committed by the prisoner, could have ignored in the sentence the very great services rendered by the prisoner while only a corporal; and which is clearly proved by Major Etheredge's original report to the colonel then in command, and by his testimony before the court-martial, to which full credence must be given. Still, under the circumstances, it is not advisable to quash the sentence. Therefore her Gracious Majesty

has granted Stephen Shand a free pardon, with leave to quit the service if he pleases.'

Thus was Stephen pardoned, and set free to return to his home.

All which Stephen had the delight to have explained to him by the major himself.

Though the major was not a little taken aback to learn from Stephen he had not actually been saved from the triangle by the Queen's goodness, but by that unlucky orderly clerk, who he feared would suffer for his mistake, but who should be cared for if he needed help.

That night was spent together in one of the best hotels of Dublin, where Stephen regained his portmanteau, with its treasury of letters.

Early next morning the friends separated: the major to join his new regiment in a distant part of Ireland; Stephen to hurry home, wondering all the way if indeed his mother's urgent message, as delivered by Miss Vandeleur in the camp, really related to future possibilities in connection with that young lady.

All past troubles forgotten, this new hope began to rise like a bow of promise in Stephen's horizon, rich indeed in colour, and in all kinds of imaginative glory.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COUNTESS'S HARDY FLOWER GARDEN.

THE course of a novelist's story may be likened in one of its aspects to that of a river; which, beginning from a very small origin, swells by degrees, passes through all sorts of troublous, rocky and stormy channels, then widens out, and so changes, to the great relief of the navigators, that whereas their business is to proceed, they cannot but yearn to linger, amid the genial serenity of the landscape around them; which in contrast with what they have passed through may appear invested with a beauty by no means due to its intrinsic character.

The scenes the reader has passed

through in connection with Stephen's military life may, we hope, similarly incline him or her to pause for a brief space, to wander mentally with us in the 'countess's garden,' before again the tumult and battle of life must be resumed.

The time is a few weeks later than that of Stephen's arrest; the place the earl's marine villa, on the coast of Devon, not far from its junction with Cornwall.

No mansion could have been placed in a more enjoyable position as regards sea and land. Overlooking, from a bold promontory, the one; its grounds and gardens behind melt into most picturesque scenery belonging to the other.

Nor is that all. One of those lovely and romantic rivers, in which Devon is so rich, flows by the base of the wall of the house, out into the sea. But it is not for the beauty of the site, or of the edifice, erected in such fine harmony with all the surroundings, that the place is so distinguished among the dwellings of the magnates of the neighbourhood. Neither is it for the artistic wealth within the walls, though that is considerable for its high

original quality if not for its extent, that persons are drawn here from distant parts, and beg for admittance.

Notwithstanding the splendour of the multitudinous beds on the lawn, the attractions of the orchid houses, and the wealth of tropical life and blossom in the conservatory, it is the fame of Lady Harlaxton's flower border that has eclipsed all the rest, and has spread so far and wide.

The visitors, if coming specially to see the pictures, or the glass-houses, are sure to pass more quickly than usual through them, in order to reach the new border of hardy plants. Many of these persons arrive in no spirit of sympathy or admiration, but rather to criticise the whole scheme as an absurdity. It is only another of the new ideas that spring up from time to time merely through our weariness of the old ones, however precious, and all sufficing for sensible people these old ones are. They have all along cultivated hardy flowers, so has everybody else, and what have they made of them? Why, a muddle, consisting of a great deal of weedy foliage, with a very small amount of flower.

At odd times, with a few lucky plants, there may be a fair show of bloom, but leaving the ground for the most part a dreary mass of haphazard forms, and unlucky combinations of colour.

And then they will turn to the rich glow, and mathematically precise forms of the flower beds, and ask how any sensible person could even bring the two into any possible comparison ?

The countess thought differently, when first she began to think at all of the matter; knowing as she did how rich our own country was in native plants of beauty; while their number and quality were so marvellously increased by contributions from every quarter of the world, not absolutely tropical.

She owned that no effect had been yet produced worthy of them, so far as she had seen; but she had, nevertheless, strong faith that the very finest effects possible in gardening would be obtained from them in the open air, when they were cultivated with the attention always bestowed on tender and rarer plants; when they were arranged with loving hands in an

orderly manner, each one to the most suitable home that could be found for it; and so their whole capacities for giving us enjoyment be brought out, by seeing them in full prosperity to begin with.

The border, entered through an arched gateway, is shut off from the rest of the garden by walls, covered with the finest hardy creepers, evergreen, and deciduous in alternate succession. A wide and long stretch of grassy lawn fills the whole middle space; bearing here and there low flowering shrubs or trees, chosen for their beauty or picturesque grace, as well as for their blossoming qualities.

On each side of the lawn runs a gravel walk, and then the border, some ten feet wide. Then another gravel walk, and so to a second and narrow border for the wall trees, which form the background.

The first thing one notices on entering is the harmonious effect of the border. There is not only definite, and beautiful form visible throughout it taken as a whole; but as we advance we find that the general form is composed of constantly

varying minor forms, that delight and engross the eye.

But even while we realise this first effect, and wonder how it has been obtained, a second grows upon us; namely, the equal but by no means formal distribution over the whole border of the plants in flower; which speedily leads to the further discovery that the flowers are connected and contrasted in lovely sequences of colour. A pink or scarlet mass of bloom is followed by one of white or cream colour; then a lilac, violet or blue, is succeeded by primrose, yellow or orange. That reached, the series begins again, but never with the same plants, and consequently never with the same precise hues of colour.

But even these contrasts are modified, wherever they would otherwise be harsh, by some intermediate tint or shade that brings the whole into softness and harmony.

'All this for the present season only?' the visitor may well ask, seeing borders from end to end so rich in blossom.

And then he finds that, let the visit be paid at any other period of the year (some four months of the winter only excepted)

the same kind of effect will be found; while a great part of the means, the particular plants, may, and at certain seasons must, be entirely different.

'What then,' he perhaps asks in wonder, 'are the plants in pots, and brought from other places of reserve, as they come into flower?'

'Nothing of the kind. Consider the growth, health, and perfection of all you see, and the very possibility of pot growth becomes out of the question.'

'It is a great puzzle!'

But one worthy of explanation. When the countess began her experiment, for she was too modest to call it any more, she took her head gardener into her counsel, and said to him,—

'My ideas are very general—very vague—wanting to attain to certain results, but as yet only seeing dimly how they are to be obtained, if at all. Let me indicate how far I have gone:—

'Suppose, then, we culled the very finest, hardy, flowering shrubs and perennials at present to be found in this country; that we divide them into evergreen and

deciduous, for many dwarf, herbaceous plants keep their leaves in winter.

'That we obtain accurate memoranda for every shrub, and every perennial, of the time, colour, and duration of its flower; also of its height, and character of growth, and colour of leaf, if at all remarkable.

'Then, how shall we so use them, that from spring to autumn there may be a constant and equal floral procession passing before our eyes, without a single gap and yet with constant change?'

'It's a knotty problem, your ladyship,' said the head gardener with a smile; 'but you have so thoroughly shown what to do, and the means of doing it, that I don't think it can be very hard to find the way to do it!'

'I am glad to hear you say so. Of course I am aware it would be, or at least might be, an endless task, if every yard or two of ground had to be the subject of deliberation, involving all the aims I have dwelt on!'

'Quite so. We must build on the mechanical. Start with a routine, and improve afterwards in what we may call the graces.'

'That is exactly what I seem to want. Find me a rough, and, as you say, mechanical plan that may dispose of all the means at our disposal to some such end as I have sketched out, and you will please me, and perhaps make yourself famous. For to say nothing of what persons in my own position might do if so started, there is not a villa or cottage garden in the three kingdoms that might not, under such guidance, become a scene of beauty and delight, however limited in its scale; and so be a powerful influence in making people care to spend more of their time, money, and thought on one of the sweetest, most useful, and most refining of all earthly pleasures.'

Week after week passed without any report of progress; and the countess, who did not like to appear impatient, and therefore asked no questions of the head gardener, wondered whether he was failing altogether, and therefore remained silent, and as she fancied uncomfortable, when they did meet.

But at last he came to seek her, his face beaming with the light of his

thoughts, and he lost not a moment in saying,—

'I hope your ladyship will forgive my being so late in bringing you news of the success or failure of my efforts to work out your design; but in truth I could not please myself at all, till I bethought me of an aged neighbour of mine who has a small but beautiful garden. A poet he calls himself, but he has not been lucky enough to get the world to call him so too. In disgust he came here, lives upon a trifling sum, and earns it chiefly by his garden.

'Well, I went to him, told him all you had said, and he went to work at once. I shrewdly suspect as much for his own sake as for mine, or for your ladyship; for he listened with great interest, and when I had done said, "Come to me this day week, and I'll provide you!"

'And he has kept his word—at least I think so. It would take too much time to describe his plan in the full detail he has given it, bit by bit to me; and besides, I fancy he means to work it thoroughly out on paper, and send it

to some garden publication. But these are the heads :—

'(1) Arrangement with regard to permanent and picturesque effect;

'(2) With regard to the seasons and their succession ; and,

'(3) With regard to the succession and harmonious contrast or combination of the flowers.

'Any permanently picturesque effect with perennials alone is impossible, even if winter be left out of the question, for they are always changing; now lost in the earth, now growing to their full beauty, then decaying, and at last once more disappearing.'

'And how does your poet meet that difficulty?'

'By planting shrub and perennial alternately; choosing only low growing and for the most part slender habited shrubs; but distinguished for gracefulness or picturesqueness of form and beauty as well as duration of flower.'

'Can they be found in sufficient number?'

'Undoubtedly!'

'Ah excellent beginning! Of course the shrubs would have no dead level, but vary constantly in height.'

'Certainly; the planting,' he says, 'must be from both the sides to the common centre in the middle, as otherwise the general effect would be from one side only. The front row, of dwarfs, must be exclusively evergreens; from the firstlings of spring, to the full tide of summer, or the declining but rich flowers and foliage of autumn. Between every two such plants of the front row would appear one of the second row; and so on through all the rows, however numerous; though I do not propose more than seven, three on each side of the tall central one, for easiness of access and culture, and for being throughout near to the eye. Lastly, the shrubs in the second row should be all deciduous, those in the third central row, all evergreen; so that seen from the front, a deciduous shrub would always appear between two evergreens in front of it; and each evergreen beyond would appear between two of its deciduous brethren.

'I see! All the space well filled, and at intervals the shrubs giving consistency and a permanent character to the whole.'

'It is very good,' said the gardener. 'But now I reach what was my difficulty, how to combine the succession of the seasons, and the succession of the flowers as regards colours, into one harmonious whole under a mechanical plan, that any person could understand and work.'

'But your friend, the poet, I see, already has got you out of that difficulty also, which was mine, when I tried to put things in shape by the aid of my pen, pencil, and water-colours.'

'After many trials, on as many plans, each upsetting long rows of the border worked out completely in accordance with it, and fit for no other plan, we found the natural order the best,—spring, summer, and autumn, then spring again. To these we eventually attached a starting point. All varieties of red flowers for spring, white flowers for summer, and blue flowers for autumn. Of course your ladyship will anticipate that as there are

only three seasons and four colours to deal with, they all change their alliances when the floral year ends, and spring returns, to which the fixed succession of red, white, blue, and yellow attaches the last-named colour.

'So that anyone possessing this very simple key knows that if they see planted in a row red flowers for spring, the next must be white flowers for summer, and so on till the entire set of changes is worked out at the twelfth plant.'

'When you have nothing left but to repeat yourself?' said the countess.

'Not exactly. We must repeat the materials; but there is a fresh and happy change, the thirteenth plant is always a winter one.'

'Ah, I am glad you do not propose to leave winter out, with nothing but its own icy cold to comfort it!'

'We provide (but just as if we couldn't help ourselves) a very decent winter garden. That thirteenth plant is to be always either an evergreen shrub —berry bearing—or of variegated foliage;

or a flowering deciduous shrub, such as that most precious of plants, the naked flowered jasmine. Then, too, we have plants like the Christmas rose, that never fails us, if we only take the trouble to put a handlight, or even a pane of glass on bricks over it, simply to protect the flowers when blossoming.'

'But what was the change you spoke of by that wonder-working thirteenth plant?' asked the countess.

'Simply this. It breaks the succession of the flower colours by taking one to itself, either in fact or in theory. So the spring, following that winter plant, now comes forth in modest and virgin beauty of snowy white, instead of beginning the series as before with a red flower.'

'Another objection occurs to me,' said the countess. 'There must be gaps between, interrupting the floral display; you can't have the flowers of either of the three seasons all blossoming at once.'

'That is true, my lady. But the plants of one season do, if well chosen for their lengthened period of blossoming, melt into the next; and the succession of colours is

arranged primarily for that very connection. Spring red flowers are immediately followed by summer white ones, so when spring recurs again the flowers are yellow, thus giving a contrast in both cases.'

'But the thing chiefly to be relied on is to fill up space that might be otherwise vacant of bloom, with bulbs, and annuals of differing heights, for the different lines. These can be so planted as to supply all possible deficiencies, and without serious interference with the legitimate occupants of the soil.'

'A most happy arrangement altogether. I like it extremely. And this sums up the method for future work in the border?'

'My friend, the poet, is one of those men who, when they have got hold of a good idea, are almost sure to show their pleasure by immediately leaving it behind, in the search for what they believe something more precious still. So was it now.

'Whilst I was enthusiastic about what he had achieved, he was enthusiastic about what he had not only not achieved, but not even condescended to explain,

beyond the rather alarming announcement that he had something in his head which would quite displace the other!'

'Really,' said the countess, smiling.

'It came out at last—as an alternative only, or an appendage—a valuable one for those who have the artistic eye and instinct to do it justice.

'It was to make a border of plants, shrubs, and perennials arranged as before, but planted in threes, not singly, in a triangle; each three combining three colours of one and the same season, perhaps varieties of the same plant, a white or a yellow between two blues or reds, for instance, or the reverse. This again might change, so that three, of one predominant colour only, but differing tints,—say for spring,—might be contrasted with the next three, also of one colour, of the succeeding summer; and also contrasted, and still more effectively, because for a longer period, when the spring season recurred farther on.

'It would be magnificent if the colours were finely chosen.'

'And that, my poet friend was sure, no

lady in the land could do so well as the Countess of Harlaxton.'

And now the border exists, and grows yearly in beauty as faults are removed, or new charms suggested, by the very success of all that is already done.

CHAPTER XV.

A GARDEN NOOK.

DIRECTING our steps to one particular corner of this lovely natural display, we enter through a gate upon a broad walk in the foreground, a far-stretching garden, with brilliant flower beds beyond; and a terrace on the left overlooking the sea, where a yacht lies anchored, with flags flying as if for a holiday.

An alcove with trellis-work, and open window spaces breast high, affords a charming resting-place and 'point of vantage' for the enjoyment of the sea view and the passing ships; while, on the other side, the broad walk passes away under a lofty Gothic arch to the house, to the court-

yard, and to the village. The beautiful arch itself forms part of a very high ivy-covered wall, belonging to the mansion. The garden is divided from the walk by a trellis pierced with arches, and supported by pillars, now alternately flushing in all the glory of their crimson and gold inflorescence, produced by two roses—the General Jacquiminot, and the Marechal Neil.

Into this retired part of the large garden attached to Lord Harlaxton's marine villa come two figures—one a servant in livery with a letter in his hand, the other also a servant apparently, but of the most genteel kind, for he simply wears a cockade in his hat, to modify the effect of his dark, well-made gentlemanly clothes. And in this shape, transformed for the third time by the aid of the hundred pounds reward, the reader meets again Gentleman Jack.

He is evidently in great spirits, and with good reason. For the first time in his life his pockets are filled with money, the possession of which there are no creditors near to dispute; he is quit of the army; he is going, so he thinks, to meet Stephen; and above and before all

he feels once more that he is in appearance, aspect, and prospects again Gentleman Jack, in spite of the cockade, and of all he desires it to imply, for the present.

'So this is the earl's garden?' he is saying to the servant, as he takes an enjoyable look round, and adds to himself, 'Good! I am here, and here I shall remain. Let all and sundry take note of that little fact!'

Again he looks round, before he continues his colloquy with the servant, which does not seem to have been so pleasant to the latter as to Gentleman Jack, for he looks sullen and disinclined to speak, while watching the stranger narrowly.

'Nice place! Very, very nice! You say you can't tell when the Honourable Stephen Chandos Froude is expected from his travels?'

'No!' was the curt answer.

'Then allow me to impart to you from my superior knowledge that I am sure he will soon be here; but whether to-day or to-morrow he has not informed me.' Then, noticing the yacht and the flags, he continued, 'How gay you are with

your bunting! Anything up to-day? I've only just come by the night train, and have the gossip of the place yet to learn.'

'I thought by your talk you knew everything,' said the servant.

'Hem! There are gaps in my knowledge. You, perhaps, are more fortunate,' responded Gentleman Jack, seeing and appreciating the prospect of a little mental sport to bring his faculty into play; and to rub off the rust of the 'barbarian and brutal life' of the camp, as he was accustomed since he had left it to say.

'Anyhow, my business isn't to answer questions,' bluntly responded the servant.

'Really, James—'

'I'm not James!'

'Well, John, Anthony, Mordecai, anything you like, I was going to say, when you rather rudely interrupted me by a disquisition on names, that I find your native frankness so refreshing after the commonplaces of society, and the place you live in so full of charms, that I cannot but acknowledge I begin to feel quite at home.'

'Your manners seem very much abroad,' retorted the servant.

'Eh?' exclaimed Gentlemen Jack, with a little but by no means disagreeable surprise, as he said to himself, 'Oh, a larder wit! I must put him down!'

Addressing himself accordingly to that business, he said,—

'The letter, is it for my master, the Honourable Stephen Chandos Froude?' giving the words with the old sonorous majestic ring, which impressed himself as well as those he was brought in contact with.

'No,' was the response.

'I'll take it,' said Gentleman Jack, holding out his hand in the most innocent manner possible.

'No, thank ye,' the servant dryly said, turning away.

'Yes, I will,' said Gentleman Jack, but only after he had slyly snatched the missive from the unsuspicious hand. Then he added, 'There, I knew it! It *is* for Miss Vandeleur!'

'Give me the letter!' demanded the servant, thoroughly roused and angry.

'Hearken, James. My master is Miss

Vandeleur's humble servant to command —isn't he?'

'Well?'

'And I am his servant.'

'Well?'

'Ergo, I am her servant.'

'Oh! She wants a scuttle o' coal. It's precious heavy. Fetch it.'

'Hem! James, yours is decidedly a superficial mind. Don't you know that in Church and State there are commonly two persons for one duty—he who takes the honours and pay, and he who does the work? James, we'll stick to Church and State. I am Miss Vandeleur's ornamental servant; you her useful one. Take up the coals.'

'Well, you are a—'

'Good fellow! I know. And so you shall find. Look!' and he took from his pocket a handful of money, gold, silver, and copper mixed altogether, through Gentleman Jack's child-like enjoyment of the sight of his wealth whenever he wanted even the humbler coin. 'I'll stand treat all round the first time we can get out for a spree.

James, or whatever else his name might be, thawed at once, and became voluble and communicative.

'There'll be a good time to-morrow, for Lord Harlaxton and Miss Vandeleur are off to-day on their wedding tour.'

'Are they married?' asked Gentleman Jack.

'They will be in an hour or two. I see them coming here. You'd better make yourself scarce. Good-bye!' And with a shake of the hands in testimony of friendship, the servant went away, leaving Gentleman Jack to his own resources.

That worthy person was struck by what he had just heard when taken in connection with the result of his eavesdropping in the camp during the interview between Stephen and Miss Vandeleur. The urgent message from the countess, repeating under more cogent circumstances the words of the advertisement, could hardly, he thought, be explained by an objection on her part to this marriage. What then was the secret of the message? Ah, that he couldn't tell, but would greatly like to discover. He had now a nice little

capital to invest in the business of speculation, and here might be a grand opportunity.

Watching with care the coming bride and bridegroom, he withdrew into the alcove, to ruminate on the sublimity of the ocean, if he happened to be discovered; to listen for something definite, if his presence remained unsuspected.

'I desired, Frances,' said the earl to her, as they entered, she leaning on his arm, and looking very pale and sad, 'to draw you away for a few minutes from our guests. I bring a bridal gift. One that has cost no little to obtain, but has been obtained at last—Stephen's pardon, after many weeks' imprisonment. It was accorded grudgingly, through the colonel's obstinate behaviour; and only given at last on account of the previous good conduct of the prisoner, and his share in the suppression of the riot; in which he is believed to have saved the life of his commanding-officer, Major Etheredge; all which the latter pressed upon the authorities, almost to his own injury.'

'Your gift touches me deeply, for the countess's sake, and I receive it as you would wish,' was all Miss Vandeleur could find words to say.

'He can scarcely get here till to-morrow, but my mother presses me all the same to put off the marriage till he does come.'

Miss Vandeleur could hardly conceal the embarrassment she felt in being obliged to say to Lord Harlaxton,—

'She has begged me again to ask you the same thing.'

'But can you tell me, Frances, what is at the bottom of all her mysterious sayings and doings; her first warning to me to beware, the recent expedition to Ireland, and now her ceaseless anxiety for Stephen's immediate presence?'

'The countess has confided nothing whatever to me,' responded Miss Vandeleur, in faltering accents. 'But I much fear a recurrence of her dangerous illness if she is refused.'

'Well, delay is possible, certainly, having a special licence, the clergyman living at hand, and our few guests being, so far as I know, not particularly pressed

for time. But do you wish it? If so, I yield.'

'Not for my own sake,' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur; and then relapsed into silence, as her only safe shield.

'I wonder,' continued Lord Harlaxton, 'that the circumstances attending Stephen's departure from his home do not of themselves show my mother he cannot wish us to delay, and therefore she should not. Would you mind calling her attention to that point?'

'I will tell her what you say,' said Miss Vandeleur, controlling as best she could the increasing agitation she felt.

'Thanks, dearest. Come then!'

As they went away through the garden, the listener rose from the seat of the alcove, where he had been lying, and began to pace the broad walk in eager excitement, ruminating in this fashion,—

'As sure as I live, and hunger for another profitable job, I am on the eve of a magnificent discovery! There must be a screw loose somewhere in the rights of the present lord; and so the countess thinks to break up the

marriage, as one of the natural consequences.

'And here she comes. But who is that with her? I must again to my hiding place.'

And thither he retired, just in time, before the coming of the countess and Mr Lynx, the lawyer, to this secluded part of the garden for a private conversation.

'As your ladyship sees, I have not lost a moment in obeying your summons. I have been travelling all night.'

'I thank you,' said the countess. 'And not the less heartily that my summons proves to have been thrown away. What I desired was to consult with you on such further measures as might be most advisable in Stephen's behalf; but I thank God he is safe, is pardoned, and we are hourly expecting him here.'

'On that, at least, I may congratulate you.'

'And as to other matters you find me dead to all,' said the countess, in tones of the deepest melancholy. 'I have miserably failed—I abandon all idea of farther attempts. I now wait only for

my son's presence to tell him the truth, to see Lord Harlaxton dispossessed of title and estates, and myself exposed to all the malignant gossip and scandal of the world.'

'May not Lord Harlaxton resist, and fight the legal battle to the last extremity? He is in possession, and he has ample means,' said Mr Lynx.

'Ample means, indeed! But all belonging to my son!' interposed the indignant countess.

'Yes; but not the less valuable for that reason to the earl in a contest. He has them, and would certainly in the event presumed use them.'

'Yes; I suppose so,' sighed the countess; 'while I have so little, and Stephen has nothing wherewith to support a costly, perhaps interminable, litigation!'

'But does your ladyship see no hope in any other direction?'

'Well, I sought for an ark of safety betimes, supposing things should come to the worst, by the failure of my principal scheme.

'Since Stephen and Miss Vandeleur

could not, or would not, shape things for a marriage, so that out of that might grow the compromise I sought for, Lord Harlaxton retaining title and estates, but resigning Miss Vandeleur; there remained only a reversal of the plan—Stephen regaining all his rights, and Lord Harlaxton obtaining with Miss Vandeleur sufficient wealth to satisfy his utmost desire.'

'And is that idea going to succeed?' asked the lawyer. 'And if so, will it satisfy both parties?'

'It may, by the sacrifice of me, and the sacrifice of the hitherto stainless fame of our ancestry. It may be a success for them; it is despair and ruin to me!'

'But when Lord Harlaxton has married Miss Vandeleur, is it so sure that he will be ready for submission even then?'

'No, I fear not. It is well that you did come. So now to business. Avoiding publicity, prepare everything, just as if you knew Stephen's claims were to be opposed.'

'A good policy,' said the lawyer. 'Men will often yield to marshalled forces, when they would merely laugh at the antics of

an undisciplined mob. So is it often with actions at law.'

'Employ, if you see occasion, the ablest counsel. I will spend,' she said, in a voice full of stern purpose, and animation, 'my last shilling if he dares—but no, he will not! I believe firmly in his honour and principle, if only he sees that honour and principle are the things really concerned; not law-wasted wealth, and bitter unending family dissension. Pity not defiance, patience not hostility, is his due. And yet how hard it is to be just! I know not what ails me. I spend my nights and days in vague fears and haunting surmises, which grow darker and darker. Would Stephen were come! Alarms steal over me as I reckon hour by hour how long he is past his time. Sometimes the old hope, the old plan seemingly so dead and buried lives again; and I ask myself what may not yet be possible, when the great revelation is made,—when all the truth becomes known.

'Idle dreams! Do not trouble yourself about them, or fear for me. I know well

how baseless they are. Come, I am sure you must need refreshment.'

As they paced slowly away, their voices dying by degrees in the distance, Gentleman Jack emerged from his hiding place in the alcove, bursting with exultation.

The secret was out. He now knew the essential truth: Stephen was lord of all, and he (Jack) was lord of him!

And so thinking, Gentleman Jack began to commune with himself in a more serious spirit than perhaps he had ever done before in his whole lifetime.

'I can now be the first to tell the true heir of his rights! A grand prospect, but with a bad introduction. "How did you find this out?" says he. "By eavesdropping," says I, "whenever I had a chance." And away go all my chances. So I must be silent; perhaps even till the claim is made. What then? Is Lord Harlaxton the man to yield without fighting? No. So there will be time for me to find or make opportunity. Meanwhile, to please and satisfy Stephen is my only course. He wanted me to turn over a new leaf. Pooh! If I do move at

all, I'll show him as many leaves turned over as would fill a volume. But it's a hard road to travel, if I really do make up my mind. And yet how often have I said to Fortune, when she would persist in tripping me up for every little *faux-pas*, "Oh, thou blessedest of goddesses, only make it worth my while, and I'm your man!" And now, perhaps, she means to take me at my word. Still, it's a hard road to travel. But I'll do nothing by halves. If I must go in for a change, I'll put to shame the old idea of scrubbing the blackamoor white, by the exhibition of Gentleman Jack as a reformed and exemplary character, and then attribute all to Stephen's example. How he would smack his moral lips at that delicious morsel!

'Ah, he comes! Not a word of my discovery at present!'

And Gentleman Jack prepared himself accordingly, as Stephen and the footman came from under the arch.

'Here's the person that says he's your servant,' observed the man respectfully.

'My servant!' exclaimed Stephen in surprise, as he looked round, and saw

Gentleman Jack standing there, looking more gentlemanly than he had ever before seen him, with the cockade in his hat as the only visible sign of his vocation of service. 'Oh, it's you,' he said, and Gentleman Jack touched his hat, servant-like.

So Stephen dismissed the footman, and then asked,—

'Jack, what is the meaning of this?'

'I wrote, begging you to let me be your servant, no matter in what capacity, and saying I would present myself this very day if I should get no reply.'

'And I did reply, saying decidedly, "No,"' responded Stephen.

'That's unlucky! I never got the letter!'

'What's that you have just pulled a little out of your breast-pocket with your handkerchief?'

'This!' said Gentleman Jack, looking at the white edge projecting from the pocket—'oh, my last love-epistle! They are always following me.'

'Allow me!' said Stephen, with great suavity of manner, as he caught at and drew forth the love-epistle. 'My letter,

Jack! giving you the lie before all the world!'

'This yours!' cried Jack, greatly surprised, or seeming so. 'Dear me! I put it by as a thing of no consequence, to read at my leisure. And I was just going to—'

'Invent fresh lies to cover the stale one!'

Gentleman Jack shook his head gravely at this sad imputation, before saying,—

'Men do lie, I know, but I am above all such practices!'

'Eh, Jack?'

'Except with white lies, which nobody minds, and everybody uses.'

'White lies! Ah Jack, they are often like white light, composed of every hue.'

'And some of them most charming to look at,' cried Gentleman Jack, in great glee at the downfall of Stephen's scientific philosophy. But surely I have improved of late?'

'You certainly have made sacrifices to tell the truth.'

'Oh, I have!—I have! No one knows or guesses how many!' he replied in seeming emotion.

'But always at my cost, and I suppose in expiation of the lies that you tell for your own special benefit.'

'Well, but consider,' said Gentleman Jack, appealingly. 'Absorbed in great objects, who stops to think of these petty details? Look at our great men. Do they, if they can help it, offer up place, honours, wealth? Yet was there ever a band of more intrepid martyrs—see how they sacrifice the public!'

It was irresistible. Stephen could no longer keep a grave face, or help bursting out into loud and prolonged laughter. Once more Gentleman Jack had won his way to confidence, and the restoration of the old enjoyable communion, which had caused Stephen to be so indulgent to other parts of Jack's character.

And quickly did the latter use his opportunity by saying, in his old confidential manner,—

'On my way here I passed your creditor, Baldercomb, talking to a man, who could only be a bailiff.'

'Are you sure?' asked Stephen, evidently concerned at the news.

'Certain. Two minutes after the bailiff and I were both coming in the direction of this place, and along the edge of a horse pond. Accidentally we jostled, and, would you believe it, he fell right in!'

'Really!' said Stephen, with a laugh.

'Really. Dived like a porpoise. Poor fellow! I had a good deal of trouble to help him out, in the course of which he got dipped again two or three times.'

But Stephen was no longer able to enjoy Gentleman Jack's sly humour over the discomfiture of the bailiff. This day might be one of the most important in his life, if he rightly understood his mother's message, as relating to some unexpected and fresh opportunities for renewing his suit to Miss Vandeleur.

He knew such events are always in the highest degree unlikely, when an engagement for marriage has been made; and, therefore, was by no means sanguine. Still it was an embarrassing as it was an irritating idea, that of being obliged to run any risk during such a time of being arrested by a vulgar bailiff; with possibly

a consequent exposure before all the family, Miss Vandeleur included!

So, after a minute's reflection, he saw he must use Jack once more, however unwillingly; so he said to him,—

'For special reasons I desire to be undisturbed for the next few hours, so that—'

'Say no more,' interrupted Gentleman Jack; 'I will keep a good watch, trust me!'

'Very well. I have not forgotten my promise. In a few days I will see what can be done for you. By-the-bye, why do you mount a cockade in your hat?'

'As your servant!'

'Mine! Am I an officer, Jack?'

'No; but you ought to be. And good servants are bound to think of these things. Besides, I should be taken for what I am, a true gentleman, if I didn't wear something to contradict facts and truth.'

CHAPTER XVI.

A BRIDAL DAY.

A JOYOUS burst of bells ringing from the neighbouring church stopped their talk. Stephen turning to look around, then saw the yacht with its gay bunting, as Gentleman Jack called it, and in an instant a dreadful sense of what was intended on the very day of his arrival overpowered him.

As he stood half paralysed at the possibility that was now filling his whole soul with a new sense of his love for Miss Vandeleur, Gentleman Jack saw his state, and guessed the reason.

'Surely you know,' he said, 'that Lord Harlaxton and Miss Vandeleur are to be married this morning?'

Prompt and fierce was the response,—

'And if they are, what is that to me? Retire, and attend to your watch.'

When he was alone and could give way to all that he felt, his thoughts ran thus:

'So dies my one and last hope that my mother's message was meant to bring me to Miss Vandeleur; a hope that I firmly believe she shared. There was something under all her words and behaviour in our interview that revealed to me a consciousness of this kind; though she was too honest, too full of the delicacy of her position, to commit herself or her future husband in any possible manner.

'Well, all that is over, and must be determinedly pushed out of mind, must be forgotten, if only I can find the way. But what then could be my mother's motive in sending for me so urgently?

'Oh, the old, old story! To keep me pinned to her apron strings, as if her one business in life was to watch over me, and do nothing to help me in the business of taking care of myself.

'They are then to be married after all! And I am called home in time to see the

whole job done before my very eyes; if only I am weak enough and foolish enough to abide the spectacle, and witness his triumph and her sacrifice. For I am sure she only cares for me.

'There is no help for it! I must again take flight, if only for a few hours or days. But my mother shall understand plainly this time why I go. I will find her at once, tell her my whole mind and then go, to return only when bride and bridegroom shall be far away. Ha! She approaches, and Miss Vandeleur with her, but not yet dressed for the altar of sacrifice. O fool! fool! Gaze on, while you own how lovely, and how true in mind and character, to all her loveliness suggests, is the girl you might have won, and have lost!'

Keeping himself carefully out of their sight, he withdrew to watch for an opportunity of finding the countess alone.

'Do you say, Frances, Lord Harlaxton offered to delay, and yet you could not for your own sake accept?'

'How could I rightly accept, knowing the marriage must take place, and know-

ing—' there the low, melancholy, sweet voice paused, unable to pursue so dangerous a theme. But the countess understood, and took up her sentence where she had stopped.

'And knowing what you have felt for Stephen! My darling girl, your blushes and your distress tell your whole position and story so plainly, that my business as your best and dearest friend is to see whether even at this last hour you cannot be saved.'

'Oh no, no, no!' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, in increasing agitation and alarm. 'It is impossible!'

'Do you mean—' began the countess.

'I mean, since I must let you see all that is in my heart, that I am—at least I was—prepared to accept my husband in a right spirit, and tread down all unlawful desires. But God only knows what will become of me, if you reopen the past; if you bid me hope, when I know that such hope can only lead to a deeper, blacker despair!'

At this moment Gentleman Jack, who, in fulfilment of his duty, had kept near to watch the arch of entrance through which the bailiff might try to find a way in,

caught sight of the ladies, and managed to get into the alcove once more to listen.

'At present,' rejoined the countess, 'I can only say this. Some old hopes and fancies have come over me so strongly, that I cannot well resist one more trial of their worth. And to begin with:—The marriage shall wait Stephen's arrival—as I myself will now make Lord Harlaxton plainly understand. You shall be in no way compromised by my attempt. Trust me for that.' She paused, as though thinking she had said enough. But in a few seconds she resumed, in a voice so plaintively sweet and winning, with no sort of intention in its tones, but which were the product of the new emotions rising in her breast, that Miss Vandeleur listened to them as if she were under a spell.

'I saw just now from my watch-tower that I have been so often visiting yesterday and to-day, a form in the distance that set my heart beating in the belief it was Stephen. I may be wrong, but the mere fancy, if it was no more, infused such new power and hope, and such an undercurrent of joy, and sense of renewed possibilities,

that instinctively rather than purposely I sought you.

'Well, we shall know presently if it was him. These papers' (she took them from her pocket) 'I do not wish to have about me, if my first interview be with Lord Harlaxton. Take them, my dear, to the jewel-case in my bedchamber. Lock the inner drawer, and the case itself carefully. They are a precious deposit.

'Do not look so frightened—so amazed. Give way to the flickering radiance I see dawning in your eyes. Life's sunshine has yet to come for you!'

Taking the papers, unable to say one single word, uncertain whether she ought to have listened to such thoughts, but unable now to take any remedy, Frances was going away to do the countess's bidding, when she stopped, looked at the countess, who smiled, ran to her, and clasped her in her arms; kissing the pale, aged lips passionately, and at last murmuring to her,—

'You would not teach me to do a great wrong; I dare think no further;' and then hurried away, followed furtively by Gentleman Jack.

CHAPTER XVII.

'NO MORE DELUSIONS, MOTHER!'

'DEAR, sweet girl!' ejaculated the countess as she reviewed what had passed, conscious of the fearful effect upon Miss Vandeleur if once more there should be disappointment; but fortifying herself as she best could for her next task—the demand she had said she would make upon Lord Harlaxton.

It was then that Stephen drew near, and discovered she was alone.

She heard a step behind her, turned, and saw him; and her face lit up with joy and new confidence that since he was here all must and should go well.

Advancing to meet him with open arms, she stopped, as if struck with paralysis, at

the sight of his cold, severe face, and forbidding gesture.

And when he spoke his words gave intensity to his aspect and manner.

'I learn on my arrival that Miss Vandeleur is to be married to-day?'

'Lord Harlaxton hopes so, Miss Vandeleur fears so, but now—'

'No more delusions, mother; I am sick of them!'

'Do you dare thus to speak to me?' responded the countess indignantly.

'I dare to tell you the truth, if you are not afraid to listen to it,' said Stephen.

'I will listen if it kills me!' cried the countess, half closing her eyes, as if to shut out the world and all pertaining to it, while she did listen.

'Truth should cure, not kill!' rejoined Stephen; 'when the disease is the suppression of all truthful and honest life, as I have too late discovered. To break away from such a life, and replace it by a better—an independent one—I have exposed myself to the most infamous of all punishments. I whisper it once to you, then seal my tongue for ever. I have narrowly escaped

being flogged; supposing that is, I could have found no means of taking myself out of the world's way beforehand!'

The countess wrung her hands, in unendurable anguish, and looking up seemed to appeal in remonstrance against heaven itself.

'These were circumstances to make even a trifler serious, and set him to the business of reviewing his past life. Two things stood out from the crowd of facts I had to confront: the one—my love for you, my reverence for your seemingly sainted life, character, and devotion to your family; and then the bitter, inexplicable contrast presented by the other; as shown in your utter disregard of all my appeals to you to let me take my place among youths of my own rank in the business and bustle of life, and win or lose my way, in accordance with my deserts.

'And at last in love for you, and weariness of myself, I became the trifler, and cynic, that men called me; and I have had to deal with the consequences. I have yet to deal with them as I best may.'

'And is this all you have to say to me

after such an absence—after my continued effort to find you—after my pressing and loving message to you by Miss Vandeleur, and after all the suffering I have endured?' asked the countess, conscience stricken, and full of grief.

Her reproach, and the pathetic tone and manner in which it was urged, seemed to affect Stephen, and he spoke more quickly and with less bitterness than before.

'You sent for me. And I come. But I warn you I am no longer what I was. I may be better, I may be worse, but—'

The unhappy countess could bear no longer the prolongation of the misery she endured, so with a cry that went to his very heart, she said,—

'Oh, my son! My son! Listen to me at once, or death may close my eyes even while I struggle to speak!'

'Speak then,' he said, but softened the abruptness of the words by the tone in which they were uttered.

'You are the true and only heir of your father, my deceased husband. Title and estates are all yours, if you choose to claim them!'

Relieved at last of the perilous secret that had so burdened her soul, the countess sank exhausted into a garden chair, close by, and bent her head to the ground.

The greatness of the revelation was lost in Stephen's mind and mood, by the preoccupation of his thoughts in the more dreadful ideas roused by it.

'And my mother is—' he almost hissed into her ear.

Receiving no answer (the countess probably not understanding all that was in the questioner's mind), he said,—

'You do right to cover your face; you who live to tell me my brother is not my father's child, and that my mother is—'

The countess literally sprang to her feet, ill and aged as she was, and towering in stern dignity before his eyes, as if her very stature had been suddenly increased, said,—

'That you live to address such words, covering such infamous thoughts to me, be thankful for! By Heaven! if there were a knife near me, and you dared to repeat them, I would bury it in your heart!'

Never before or since, in all probability, did such a threat produce an effect so utterly unlike what was expected from it as now.

'Mother!' cried Stephen, his face glowing with heartfelt admiration, and intense love. 'Mother! go on! I can listen now. Go on! I conjure you, speak! Fear nothing!'

'Let our hearts alone speak, and together!' responded the now happy countess, opening her arms, and clasping him round and clinging to him in a prolonged embrace, as if she could not otherwise bear her feeling of measureless content.

She did, however, manage to add,—

'My honour shall after to-day rest in your keeping. You will then know all. Oh, my boy! my boy!'

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN AWFUL DILEMMA.

FOR some minutes mother and son remained silent, and in the deep comfort that both were conscious of.

It was not till he felt his mother's physical agitation had ceased, and that he found her eyes seeking his, as if desirous to begin the business of taking counsel together, that Stephen would trust himself again to speak. Then he asked,—

'What about the proofs? Are they forthcoming, and clear?'

'Forthcoming, and absolutely clear,' rejoined the countess, emphatically. 'Mr Lynx learned all from your father in his last illness, as you to-day shall also learn

the whole in the council of the assembled family. The proofs are in Miss Vandeleur's keeping.'

'What! Does she know all? Did she know all when she came to me in Ireland?' demanded Stephen, anxiously; afraid for the moment he was to have a lurid light thrown over that meeting which had so changed and affected all his thoughts and feelings about Miss Vandeleur.

'She knows nothing whatever. Suspects nothing, except that which you can hardly find fault with,—that I will, if I can, even at this last hour, prevent her marriage to Lord Harlaxton.'

'Where is he now?' Stephen asked eagerly, as if moved by some new and important thought.

'With a guest somewhere in the garden.'

'I will seek him instantly,' said Stephen, and was passing away without another word. But the countess detained him to say, with anxious look and voice,—

'Remember! The hope that has so long borne me up, and which you cannot fail any longer to understand, may now come to fruition through his consent, if

you really love, if you care for me, and for that I have held so dear, the honour of the family. Your attitude these next few minutes may decide everything for weal or endless woe. Say, then, one word to comfort me.'

'Give me time,' said Stephen, kissing her. 'These things are for the moment overwhelming. Let me think them calmly over. And let me find Lord Harlaxton to begin with.'

And waiting no further question, he went away.

Scarcely had he left the countess before Miss Vandeleur rejoined her, in a state of great agitation, and began hurriedly and excitedly to speak,—

'Your last words have opened to me a vista in which I wander like one distraught, seeing at either end only disgrace and ruin!' Bursting into tears, and wringing her hands, she murmured, in passionate distress, 'I have no mother to appeal to.'

'Not even in me?' said the countess, taking her hand, and looking her in the face.

'I know not what I am saying. May I then speak to you as I would to my own parent if she were alive, and able to listen to the unhappy, desperate position of her child.'

'Try me!' said the countess; and for the moment said no more. But the look of love, at once so sweet and penetrating, that accompanied the simple and brief words, powerfully affected Miss Vandeleur; and decided her to have no reserve, but speak frankly all that was in her heart.

'I have many—many times, resisted the thought and feelings that move me now; but your voice, your sympathy, your hope and effort for me, have given them such new and fearful power that they carry me away, whither perhaps I ought not to go.'

'Speak then, my darling. I will receive all in sacred, inviolable trust!'

'I can no longer bear so false, so cruel a position! I can no longer conceal from myself that I do not love Lord Harlaxton; and, ah, me! that I must say it, that I do love Stephen. Can it be right, then, to let this marriage go on? Must

I wilfully break a solemn engagement, made to a man whom I respect, and who has in no sense wronged me; or keep it, and break the more than engagement of heart and soul?'

'It is indeed an awful dilemma!'

'But I will break through it,' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, passionately. 'At least I will try. I will appeal to Lord Harlaxton himself!'

'Perhaps you are right,' said the countess; thoughtfully weighing in her mind all the chances, and the probable effect on her own plans.

'Right or wrong, I feel to have no longer a chance!'

'Courage, then, Frances—courage; for he comes!'

And so saying she retired to a little distance to wait the issue.

'Why, Frances,' said the earl, as he came towards her, 'I have been seeking you everywhere.'

'And you have now found me. May it be significant of our both finding something else to-day that we greatly need—peace.'

'You look and speak so like the chorus of a Greek tragedy that I am constrained to ask you, if anything has happened?' said Lord Harlaxton, with a disturbed air, which he tried to conceal by a half smile.

'Much!' responded Miss Vandeleur; whose frankness of character, and the urgency of her purpose, impelled to take the most direct way. 'Much that I would other tongue than mine had to give words to, for I find myself in the dreadful position of being obliged to tell one, whose life-long respect and affection are necessary to my happiness, that I cannot be his wife.'

'Miss Vandeleur!' exclaimed the earl, unable to express otherwise the astonishment, anger, and sense of outraged feeling and dignity that possessed him.

'Reproach me, wound me with your bitterest speech, I will patiently bear all, knowing I deserve all, for not better knowing my own heart; or of not taking better and timelier means to know it, when I, in grateful feeling of your brotherly kindness, having then no right

to think of anyone else, came at last to hope I might be a true, loving, and devoted wife! Lord Harlaxton, in anguish and bitter remorse, I now tell you I love your brother!'

'And you now ask me—what?' demanded the earl, in the iciest of tones.

'Oh, my lord, I see in your eyes what may be my death doom; but I felt I must speak now, or be silent evermore!'

'If you will be silent, as you say, evermore, and go with me presently to the altar, either in Stephen's presence or without him, I too will be for ever silent on the great disgrace of to-day.'

'What disgrace?' asked Miss Vandeleur, her face aflame with shame and excitement. 'My appeal, or your answer?'

'Take time; consider,' said Lord Harlaxton, with a stern, fixed, immoveable countenance. 'I will return shortly. Meanwhile, I will, for your sake, avoid my brother if I can. He is here, as doubtless you know.'

He turned, and walked slowly away,

refusing to listen to the pleading voice that followed him—

'One word more!'

Thus left, all Miss Vandeleur could say, or think, or feel was conveyed in the murmured sentence — 'Gone! I have committed myself beyond recall! And in vain!'

CHAPTER XIX.

A MYSTERIOUS THEFT.

'WELL?' inquired the countess, advancing the moment she saw Miss Vandeleur alone.

'Nothing can be more ill!' exclaimed Frances, in despair. 'He has refused me, and I am left to bear all the consequences of having spoken. O God, help me! What shall I do! What can I do?'

'Frances, this very hour there must be held a solemn council of the entire family. But I will not wait for that to tell you the chief fact I have to make known; and in which you will readily find the explanation of things that may well have perplexed you. Prepare your-

self for a great surprise. I have just made known to Stephen that he is my late husband's sole heir, that title and estates are all his.'

'Merciful heaven!' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur. 'What a calamity have I then just barely escaped. Had you told me this before my appeal to Lord Harlaxton, I must have been silent; or if not, have rendered my motives and myself infamous in his eyes, and perhaps not in them only!'

'I foresaw that danger,' said the countess, 'and checked myself in time. But this is the hour for action. Bring me the packet instantly.'

Too deeply impressed with the magnitude, danger, and it must be said, possibilities of the entirely new position opened to her, Miss Vandeleur hurried away in silence to obey the countess's command.

Before she could return, Stephen came back, heated and impatient, to say,—

'I can nowhere find him. I thought one moment I saw him walking along in a distant part of the garden—but the figure turned—perhaps saw me—and dis-

appeared in the shrubbery. If it was he, he evades me.'

'We will seek him together, presently. But now, Stephen, I have something to say to you about Miss Vandeleur.'

That young lady's re-appearance in the wildest state of alarm and agitation, turned the thoughts of both in a very different direction.

The moment she got to the countess, ignoring the fact that Stephen was again before her for the first time since the day when she had seen him taken a prisoner by his fellow-soldiers, she could now only think of the new danger to his rights she had to make known.

'The jewel-case has been broken open within the last few minutes. The papers are all gone!'

'Were they in the usual place of deposit?' asked Stephen, his countenance darkening.

'Yes,' responded the countess, greatly excited.

'And did *he* know?'

'He has noticed the jewel-case in my bedroom since we have been here, and

he would recognise it as the one belonging to my husband's cabinet, in which he had seen me deposit the packet,' said the countess.

Miss Vandeleur saw their growing suspicions, and felt it necessary at once to interpose.

'I do not for a moment believe that Lord Harlaxton has touched them, or is capable of such an act, under any circumstances!'

Her bold, generous, self-forgetful words brought back a more natural tone to the others.

'Nor do I,' affirmed the countess, beginning to see the event might be less serious than her first fears had supposed, if Lord Harlaxton had no share in it.

'Nor do I,' also said Stephen, after a thoughtful pause. 'But that is now my first business to decide;' and he again plunged into the deeper recesses of the garden in search of the earl.

'Heaven only knows to what complications this may lead,' said the countess, as she turned from watching Stephen's flying footsteps to speak to Miss Van-

deleur. 'Stephen, in his love for you, which I care no longer to conceal, will perhaps say things that Lord Harlaxton may resent, and so a deadly quarrel grow, just when all seems ripening for a final peace. Frances, I am too feeble to keep pace with their movements, should they meet. Go, then, to find them—be sure you do find them—while I follow as I best can. Oh! keep with them, if only to hold them under restraint, till I come.'

'But can I leave you in safety?'

'God has been merciful to me, my darling, hitherto. I doubt not in His infinite love and pity he will take me through this one critical day if for no more. Go, go!'

Miss Vandeleur went, passing lightly and swiftly over the grassy lawn; and the countess sighed to think of the difference between such motion, and her own slow sad pace, as she painfully followed.

CHAPTER XX.

STRANGE STROKES OF FORTUNE.

SCARCELY had the countess gone, before Gentleman Jack returned in a great state of excitement.

'The cabinet broken open! jewels and the papers all clean swept away! So ends my dream to seize the precious documents, and bear them in triumph to Stephen.

'But where is the thief? Ha! can this be him dressed as a servant, creeping along so suspiciously under the shade of the trees?'

The man, he noticed, had papers in his hand; and it struck Gentleman Jack that if he was the thief, he was trying to get a hurried glimpse of them before throwing them away.

Catching sight of Gentleman Jack, who considerately appeared not to see him, the man hurriedly thrust the papers into the pocket of an overcoat. Then he advanced so quietly cool, and nodding with such pleasant familiarity to Gentleman Jack, who stood in the way of his exit through the arch, that the latter feared the thief-idea might be about to share the fate of his recent dream.

Nodding in reply, he said,

'You are like me, I suppose, in waiting?'

'Yes, and so sick of it, that I shall wait no longer, but go.'

'Who's the master?' asked Gentleman Jack.

'Sir Simeon Solomon,' was the reply.

'Ah! the name proclaims his quality. An ideally estimable gentleman, no doubt. Take a drop with me?'

'Got it about you?' said the servant of Sir Simeon.

'Never go without!' was Gentleman Jack's reply, as he produced a flask of whisky, and a small drinking cup; which he filled, and handed to his new acquaintance. 'Try that, my boy! Drink it

slowly and appreciatively, or you will lose the fine aroma.'

While the man did drink, with head and arm uplifted, Gentleman Jack drew out the papers he had noticed, and so cleverly, that no suspicion was excited.

The knight's servant smacked his lips as he finished, then said,—

'You just *have* given me a treat! Never tasted such good stuff since I and Sir Simeon Solomon were in the Highlands last summer.'

'Really! Well, then, let's finish the flask,' said Gentleman Jack; as he again filled and handed the cup, which was drained to the last drop.

'Delicious!' ejaculated the man, as he drew fresh breath. 'Sorry I can make you no return; I am such a poor devil!'

'If you like what I have done, I am more than repaid,' said Gentleman Jack, with effusion, but still not moving aside.

'Is that my way out?' he was asked.

'Oh, certainly!' responded Gentleman Jack, as if he had only just discovered that the man wanted to go past him, and so hastened to correct the oversight. 'You'll

find a lot of servants outside, quite prepared to show you the way you should go.'

The two men looked hard at each other; and one of them was saying to himself,

'What the devil does he mean by that? Mischief?' The same personage then clapping his hand to his pocket, discovered the loss of his papers.

Again the two tried which could first stare the other out of countenance; while the stranger drew forth a revolver, which he just allowed his late entertainer to see, and then hand and revolver disappeared together into the pocket.

'Good-bye!' he said. 'When next we meet I'll do you a good turn!'

'Good-bye!' echoed Gentleman Jack; and to his great relief, he was left alone to his reflections. 'A good turn—eh? yes, a turn of his revolver to put a bullet into me. By Jove! it was lucky I felt that revolver before trying to nab him. He didn't come for papers, so didn't much mind letting them go. A pretty swag of jewellery he must have in that other pocket.

'Now, if these *are* the papers, I'm doubly a made man. The method and the

fact of getting them will alike tell; whereas if I had been the thief, my good intention might not have saved me from unpleasantness.'

Just as he was about to examine the packet, he saw Lord Harlaxton approaching, and hastily put it away. Here was a new difficulty. If he did not at once tell him what had happened, the fact would surely be damaging hereafter; and if he did tell him, the papers were sure to be demanded.

However, he made up his mind; so when Lord Harlaxton came, and was about to pass him by thinking he was a guest's servant, Gentleman Jack respectfully addressed him,—

'I beg your lordship's pardon, but a packet of papers has fallen into my hands in a most extraordinary way!'

'How? When?' hurriedly demanded Lord Harlaxton, whose mind was becoming enveloped in a dense atmosphere of suspicion.

'While in attendance on Mr Stephen, I saw Miss Vandeleur come out of the countess's bedroom, wringing her hands in

great distress, and crying,—"The papers are stolen! What will the countess think?" I went into the room, and saw a cabinet broken open and empty. I ran out to the garden to seek the thief. He did come here, looking like a servant: the packet of papers, which he had not had time, perhaps, to put away in his flight, sticking out of his pocket. I gave him drink—and got the papers; no doubt the very ones Miss Vandeleur was so troubled about!'

'Where are they?' said Lord Harlaxton anxiously.

'I thought it best, my lord, to place them temporarily in a place of safety.'

'You mean you have not got them about you?'

'No, my lord!' responded Gentleman Jack boldly, but determining this should be his last lie.

'And where is the thief?'

'Gone!'

'Gone! And you let him go?'

'It's bad arguing with a man, my lord, when he reasons with a revolver!'

'A very strange story! Can you produce these papers in proof it is a true

one? If so, I may reward you. If otherwise, I shall call my servants and place you in custody. I am a magistrate.'

'I will fetch them immediately. But, in self-defence, I am bound to say I did wish to have given them to my master, Mr Stephen.'

'I will take the responsibility of satisfying my brother.'

'Very well, my lord.'

'Be speedy. You will find me still somewhere about the garden.'

Then, left alone, Gentleman Jack once more tried to read the papers; when he caught sight of the bailiff, evidently tired of waiting for him, and probably growing suspicious of foul play.

With a curse, he was going to mystify and send him off in some other and safer direction, when a new train of thought brought with it an entire change of purpose.

Suppose he did let the bailiff arrest Stephen? It would not be for long—and the time might be extremely useful. To himself, while he read and rightly understood the value of the papers, and

fulfilled his promise to Lord Harlaxton, whose threat had been as convincing as the thief's revolver: to Stephen, as keeping him safe for a little while, if the earl should go like a Malay on the rampage, when *he* had read them.

So he anticipated the bailiff's coming by a shrill whistle-call, the agreed-on signal for action.

Presently the bailiff stole in through the arch, looking cautiously about at every step, as though he had no very great confidence in his introducer. Then he advanced, and the following colloquy took place between them; the bailiff's mind and person fresh from the indignity of so valuable a member of the law, being seen floundering like a porpoise in a horse-pond; and vehemently suspicious of the man who came to his aid being the instrument of his downfall, and leaving him antagonistically inclined in consequence.

As the two met, Gentleman Jack confidently smiled; but the bailiff's face looked thundery, and threatening an explosion, so the former hastened to say,—

'You see I keep my promise to bring

you nicely in, without fuss of any kind, or danger of losing your prey. You shall now nab your man.'

The bailiff had on above his ordinary bailiff-like clothes a handsome frock-coat, lent by Gentleman Jack after the tumble into the water, to make the man of law reasonably presentable, if seen moving about a nobleman's garden.

'Really, you look quite the gentleman in my coat (only lent for the occasion, mind); and you smell quite sweet again, in spite of your unlucky somersault in the horse-pond.'

'Which you did o' purpos!' hoarsely exclaimed the irate victim.

'Oh dear, no, I couldn't!' replied Gentleman Jack, with charming coolness and self-possession.

'I tell you, my fine feller, you're in contempt for that. Perhaps you don't know what contempt in law means?' said the bailiff.

'I understand perfectly contempt for law. Is that it?' queried Gentleman Jack innocently.

'No—it hisn't. The law purwides that

any one hobstructing a hofficer in his dooty may be summoned afore the Queen's Bench, where her blessed Majesty herself sits to punish sich offenders.'

'Now, does she really?' responded Gentleman Jack, appearing greatly impressed with the fact.

'You've heerd of writ of fieri facias, I dare say?' remarked the bailiff, who began to exhibit an air and look of unmistakable enjoyment in this novel encounter of wits.

'No, what do they mean?' asked Gentleman Jack.

'That's the Queen's hangry at sich abominable condict, looks on it with a fiery face, and sends forth her dockements to say so,' concluded the bailiff; with the grand air of a judge dismissing in noble anger a convicted but shameless criminal.'

'That's your view of the case, is it?' asked Gentleman Jack. 'Got six and eightpence about you? Just see, and I'll give you information worth double the money.'

'Of all the impedent vagabonds I ever did set eyes on—' began the bailiff, but was interrupted.

'Listen, O legal simpleton! You were

not obstructed in your "dooty," but only in coming where the "dooty" was to be performed. A bad case! Don't harass your feelings, nor empty your pockets by embarking on it.'

'Of all the cool cowcumbars I ever did meet with—' began a second time the bailiff, having no doubt some good thing to say at the close of the sentence; but Gentleman Jack saw and kept off the scathing shaft by exclaiming,—

'Come, bustle! Look alive! While you have been talking, I've been watching. I think now I see our man in the distance,' said Gentleman Jack, resuming business.

'Bustle! Bustle!' echoed the bailiff, with an expressive gesture of contempt. 'Bustle! Yes, that's the way I began bisness, and the werry fust week caught six roaring coughs, one a top of another. You could hear 'em all a-going at once. Now I minds my constitution and my gents at the same time. So I must fust go outside to the public-house on the green, and get a drop of brandy, on account o' that there spill in the horse pond.'

'Stay!' cried Gentleman Jack, in alarm

for the failure of his scheme at the very moment of promised execution. 'You are a man of sense, and will overlook the exuberance of my animal spirits, excited by the pleasure of so witty and charming a companion. You were a wild dog yourself once—eh? Wasn't it so? No pretty girl safe near you—eh?' The laugh and the poke in the ribs that accompanied the words were irresistible, and the bailiff broke out in an irrepressible roar.

'Ha! ha! ha! Perhaps I was. Ha! ha! ha!' And then he said to himself, but not in the least as if objecting to being overheard, 'What a merry devil 'tis! Ha! ha! ha!'

'Well now, listen. I am not the one to restrict any man in his little indulgences. Heigho! I hear a touching appeal just now from the very bottom of my stomach—Only one pint of mild ale! but I answer, Can't be done till after business. And then, my friend, won't we two be happy together? as the old song says, or might have said. So now, to be serious and communicative—a marriage is about to take place at the neighbouring church.'

'I don't see what that has to do with my glass o' brandy,' said the bailiff, persisting in his visit to the public-house.

'No. You're not deep, and with such engaging simplicity, who could wish you were? But now mark me, and ponder over my words. The young lady has bad taste, and prefers a younger brother, poor as a rat, to a rich nobleman.'

'And he's the werry man we's a-looking arter!' cried the bailiff, with sudden and vivid insight.

'What a burst of intelligence! He is!' Gentleman Jack happened at that moment to take a fresh glance in the direction from which he was expecting Stephen, and suddenly cried out, 'Run, run! For there he is!' and he himself set the example of swiftly changing his place, so that he might withdraw unseen.

With an indescribable mixture of contempt, and pity for Gentleman Jack, and of delicious enjoyment of his own superiority on his face, the bailiff said,—

'What poor creturs we is arter hall, when we wentures out of our proper spears! Young man, clever as you think

yourself, you wouldn't make a bailiff! If I were to run there's no law to pervent him a-running to. An' my legs, though werry good uns for steadiness and wear, is decidedly bad for speed. So that's the scheme as we's a-helpin forrard. He's a deep un who inwented it!' Then putting a hand each side of his mouth, he whispered hoarsely into Gentleman Jack's ear,—'Was it the hearl?'

'Mum!' answered the latter, with a grave look of cautious wisdom. 'I say nothing. But you just are a sharp one!'

'Now, young feller, vanish. Too many cooks spile the broth.'

Gentleman Jack answered with a laugh—

'I assure you I have not the slightest intention of waiting to see the capture,' and so withdrew, to examine the papers, and if they were what he supposed, to take them to the earl.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ARREST.

AS the bailiff watched the approaching victim, who came along a path, the full breadth of which was partly hidden from his sight, he communed with himself enjoyably,

'Hengaging hinnocent! He's a coming as hunsuspicious as a new-born baby into the werry jaws of the lion, where he'll be made a lien of himself as we law jokers say. What! The devil! There's two on em! Ow am I to discover which is which?'

He moved towards the arch to follow Gentleman Jack, and cried,—

'I say!' as loudly as he dared, but saw it was no good. 'Hout of sight! Hof course!' And then, in bitterness of spirit,

he hid in the alcove, to watch and consider how to act.

Presently Stephen and a friend, a diplomatic official, came to the broad walk, and there stopped, the latter at the time saying,—

'Oh, I am only here for your brother's wedding. I am to be his best man. And in what direction of activity do you think now to move?'

'If the offer you once so kindly made me, and which I was not then able to accept, of an introduction to diplomatic life, is still available, I should gladly embrace it,' responded Stephen.

'Hum! Ha! I am most willing. But things are a good deal changed since then. However, I will see what can be done, and let you know.' Such was the cautious reply of Stephen's diplomatic friend, and in return Stephen dryly expressed his thanks. 'I suppose you know,' added the official, with a laugh, 'the old definition of an ambassador—"One sent abroad to lie for his country"?'

'Yes,' responded Stephen; 'and of all the sayings that degrade official life, this

is, I think, the most corrupting and mischievous!'

'Really! Why?' was the amused rejoinder.

'Because it so perfectly hits off and excuses the besetting sin of the vocation —to dally with the convenient falsehood, while appearing only to disseminate enjoyable truth.'

And Stephen looked as if he were indulging himself with some of the enjoyable truth of which he spoke at his friend's expense, who quickly said, as he glanced at his watch,—

'I am delighted with your explanation, and will take care you shall have an opportunity to carry your views into action, the very first time an embassy goes out—on your principles!'

'Which!' said Stephen to himself, as he looked after the departing official; 'he sees were meant as a satire upon his own.'

And again he went on his search through the garden for Lord Harlaxton, taking a different route from the diplomatic official.

Seeing this, the bailiff rushed forth, exclaiming,—

'D—n it! I can't harrest 'em both till I know which is the right man. Ha! one of 'em comes back.'

So he retreated under the arch, to prevent a passage that way to the village, and the open country without his knowing.

It was Stephen who returned, weary and irritable at the growing belief that Lord Harlaxton was determinedly keeping aloof.

'The bridegroom is nowhere here,' he said to himself. 'So I must seek him in the house, surrounded perhaps by the wedding guests, or luxuriously reclining at the feet of the bride.'

He was about to move through the arch as the shortest way to the front of the house, when the bailiff met him, and said hurriedly,—

'Beg pardon, sir, but that gent who left you a minute or two ago was the Honourable Stephen Froude, wasn't he?'

Stephen looked at the bailiff, suspected his quality and business, but thought of his friend, and at once said,—

'No, I am he.'

'That trick's raythe too stale!' cried

the bailiff, grinning from ear to ear, and setting off at once in pursuit of the diplomatic official who had gone through the arch.

Stephen laughed heartily as he thought,—'If my diplomatic friend could have overheard, he would almost have been tempted to try in future truth as the only deceiver. Now, then, to use my freedom.' As he moved to go through the arch, he was obliged to add, 'Devil take him, he's here again, and stopping the way!' So he retired a little to avoid notice.

'I must give it hup,' the bailiff was saying to himself as he came back from his unsuccessful pursuit of the diplomatic official, who had gone into the house, where the bailiff knew well he must not attempt to follow him. 'I must give it hup. My bootiful perfession. My legs is a turning rebels.' And he went to the alcove to rest them.

Stephen now tried to pass him by unnoticed whilst his back was turned; but whether the attitude itself were a trick, suggested to the bailiff by seeing Stephen waiting about as if to get away; or that he

heard the step and was instantly roused, he moved directly so as to confront Stephen, and then a second time address him,—

'You say your name is Honourable Stephen Froude?'

'Yes,' Stephen could not but say.

The bailiff smiled a benevolent smile, approached Stephen in a friendly and familiar manner, so that Stephen really thought some very different and much pleasanter communication was forthcoming. But suddenly the bailiff made a rush at him, shouting at the same time,—

'I got you. You are my prisoner. I'll knock you down if you resists.'

'Don't make a fool of yourself, and pray keep your hands by your side. I've no intention to resist, as you must have seen.'

'Then I arrests you at the suit of George Baldercomb for six hundred and fifteen pounds ten shillings and sixpence. And—ha! ha! ha! I begs pardon for doubtin' a gent's word. But it's so precious seldom the law finds sitch willin' assistents in sitch quarters, that I was quite taken in. Ha! ha! ha! You see we isn't used to it.'

And therewith the bailiff wiped away the moisture in his eyes.

'This has happened at a most unlucky time,' said Stephen, half to himself.

'Right as a trivet!' ejaculated the bailiff, triumphantly slapping his knee. 'That's always the fust obserwation.'

'I must seek a friend who will help me,' remarked Stephen, who was all the while meditating how to extricate himself.

'Oh, it's hall right!' cried the bailiff, in full satisfaction he had got the true man. 'The friend is inwariably the second deloosion!'

'I see Lord Harlaxton is coming this way,' said Stephen. 'He is, I believe, seeking me, as I have long been seeking him. I must now speak to him, and alone. You can wait where you like, close by, only keeping out of sight and hearing. Take this;' Stephen removed from his finger a ring of some value, and handed it to the bailiff,—'I give you this, and with it my word of honour, that you shall be paid before you leave, or you shall take me with you.'

The bailiff looked hard at him, and then

turned away as if to reflect. This he did two or three times before he took the proffered ring, and said,—

'I never did such a thing in hall my life before, but, damme, I will do it for you now!'

Stephen thanked him, and as he was going, stopped him to ask,—

'Do you mind telling me whether any one beside your employer, Baldercomb, has interfered, and so contrived that I should be arrested at this time?'

The bailiff looked cautiously round before answering, then came back and came close to Stephen, and once more the hoarse whisper was heard noisily saying,—

'I believe the hearl did it hall!'

And then with various nods, winks, and knowing gestures, he went to his place of waiting and watching.

'Jack,' thought Stephen, as though addressing him, 'I beg your pardon for thinking it possible you could be so treacherous! Still, let me suspend judgment. Lord Harlaxton may be as innocent of this ruse as he must be of the burglarious seizure of the papers.

'And even were he guilty of both, I have something to think of at this moment infinitely more precious than his exposure and punishment, supposing that my mother's state, and his present relations with Miss Vandeleur admitted of either.

'He approaches. And, is it possible? —a packet, doubtless the stolen one in his hand!'

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MEETING OF THE BELLIGERENTS.

AS Lord Harlaxton came from the garden, out of the broad sun, he was surprised to find Stephen there; for he had come to the only sequestered part of the grounds to read the papers obtained from Gentleman Jack.

'Well, you have got back?' he said, to Stephen, as he recovered from his momentary embarrassment, and held out his hand. 'Glad to see you.'

'And I you,' said Stephen, taking the proffered hand after a brief hesitation. 'But dismissing to a more convenient time all matters that can wait, I wish to

say a few words on my own position, and your relations with Miss Vandeleur.'

'Stay!' cried Lord Harlaxton. 'As to your position I am most ready to listen, and respond in an amicable spirit to anything reasonable; but as to the young lady who is presently to be my wife, I prefer to discuss our relations only with her.'

'No, Philip, that cannot be,' said Stephen, with an air of stern decision. 'You will talk them over with me, and now, unless you prefer a discussion on a different theme, which will certainly be now.'

'Really!' replied Lord Harlaxton, in a tone of irony. 'Do things go with so high a hand? Is it this packet of papers, which I was about to read, that—'

'I see, then, you do understand the nature of what I was about to say on my own part,' said Stephen.

'Are you sure you understand it yourself?' retorted the earl, growing more and more angry.

'Try me!' responded Stephen. 'But pray be careful. I did wish—I do still wish—that we should take counsel together in a friendly spirit.'

'I respond to that,' said Lord Harlaxton, 'but request that the name of my bride may not again be mentioned.'

'You must really allow me to take my own course in opening my mind to you,' urged Stephen, in a temperate tone.

'And if I will not,' demanded the earl, 'what then?'

'Then, my lord of Harlaxton,' exclaimed Stephen, losing temper, and throwing away all the restraint he had been struggling to keep up, 'I give you that title for the last time unchallenged.'

'My good fellow, I am really concerned for yourself,' responded the earl, 'in having to say the title does not really depend on your benevolence, however charming.'

The earl apparently knew he was adding fuel to fire by his every speech, and was not unwilling to give way to the impulses that possessed him.

Nor was Stephen by this time loth to follow the example.

'You compel me then to go on. I wanted to be silent, for your sake, for my mother's, and for the salvation of the family's honour. I was content to

leave you in the fullest enjoyment of all you possess, asking only in return one thing—the lady to whom I have given my whole heart, and whose affections I have reason to believe I have won.'

'Choose your path, this way or that!' said Lord Harlaxton, in a voice of suppressed fury, as he pointed in the two opposing directions; 'and I will take the other. I hold no longer converse with you.'

'So be it!' said Stephen. 'Meantime I do not yet ask you how you obtained the papers in your hand, but simply say they are mine—are addressed to me by name—I demand them!'

'And I refuse to give them up till at least they are read!' said the earl.

'I can wait,' rejoined Stephen. 'Read them now. I will not leave without them!'

'But what if they should prove of such a character that I am bound to detain them in the interest of justice for the prosecution of their author?'

The provocation was unendurable, and was responded to in the same spirit by Stephen.

'Do you thus refer,' he said, in his quietest but most penetrating and significant of tones, 'to a packet stolen from my mother's jewel-case, and which is now found on you?'

'It is time, I see, to throw off the veil and acknowledge ourselves for what we are,' said Lord Harlaxton, 'mortal enemies. There is my yacht. The wind is favourable. Three or four hours will take us to France. There are weapons in the cabin. Papers or no papers, right or no right, I offer you that solution.'

'I accept,' said Stephen, who had by this time recovered all his natural coolness of demeanour, when confronted by real dangers, or their equivalent. So he added, 'We had better leave a message that we are going away together, to discuss in privacy our affairs.'

Lord Harlaxton took a note-book from his pocket, tore a leaf out, and handed it to Stephen, saying,—

'Write, then, and we will both sign it, to give the ladies the more certain satisfaction.'

While Stephen was thus engaged, Lord

Harlaxton opened the packet, took out and glanced over the contents, and began to read, but seeing there was no time to do more, replaced them, as Stephen spoke,—

'I have signed.' And he gave the paper to Lord Harlaxton, who appended his initials. 'How shall this be delivered?'

Lord Harlaxton hurriedly answered him:

'Miss Vandeleur is coming. She must not know or suspect. What's to be done?' asked the earl, greatly distressed at the interruption.

'Make a virtue of necessity,' rejoined Stephen, 'and get her to be the bearer. That of itself will avert suspicion.'

As she drew near, Stephen advanced to meet her with a smile, and said,—

'You will not wonder, Miss Vandeleur, that Lord Harlaxton and I, having many and important things to talk about, are going for a short sail in his yacht. Will you kindly, after reading, give that to my mother?'

And he handed the paper to her, which she glanced at, but hardly took time to read, her thoughts being otherwise engaged.

She looked from one to the other, with such a penetrating glance, that Lord Harlaxton could not stand it, so turned away. Stephen's eyes confronted hers, and made no sign. Presently she said, and smiled for the first time in her turn,—

'Ladies do not usually invite themselves into the society of gentlemen; but the day is so fine, the air so enchanting, the water so refreshing to one's senses through all its heavings and murmurings, that I am inclined to petition to go with you. I will nestle in a corner, and if I grow tired, read myself asleep over my book—a perfect one for the purpose—it is so deliciously dull.' And therewith she took a small volume from her pocket.

The two men exchanged glances, and Stephen again spoke,—

'Miss Vandeleur cannot doubt that her society is to be preferred before that of any other person in the world; but business is business, and must be done in a business-like manner. So I beg her to excuse me just now.' And he moved slowly towards the yacht.

'I appeal to you, Lord Harlaxton,' cried

Miss Vandeleur, in anxious tones, forgetting all her previously assumed gaiety.

'He does but say what I can repeat,' cried Lord Harlaxton. 'Adieu, for a little while!' And he too went towards the yacht, turning once to kiss his fingers to her, but receiving no reciprocating sign.

But she followed swiftly upon them, so that they had scarcely jumped upon the deck, and shouted to the men to 'Let go!' before she was on the edge of the Terrace Quay, and crying aloud to them in ringing tones,—

'You may get off before I can descend in safety, but not so far but I think I can reach you by a bold leap. I will certainly try, if you do not stop!'

In another moment she would have been as good as her word, and perhaps have fallen into the sea, for the yacht was tossing about, when Stephen's voice was heard in stentorian tones to the sailors,—

'Stop! stop!' And he was just in time—the vessel had not actually quitted her moorings: so the ropes were again made fast.

Seeing their chance was over, both the

gentlemen ascended to the quay, looking a little flurried, and ashamed of the position in which they now were, but prepared to carry it off by a humorous bravado.

But the reception that awaited them put them in a very different frame of mind.

'Do you really think,' asked Miss Vandeleur, looking from one to the other, 'you have deceived the poor simple girl who so wanted and tried to put faith in you? Your false message has been wasted. I spare you both the offence of its delivery to the countess. Take it, in all its worthlessness!'

She then tore the paper into small pieces; her vehement fingers seeming to take a sinister pleasure in making them as small as possible, and then she threw them at their feet.

'But the countess comes. Perhaps she may be easier of belief, if you will again try the deception on her!'

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FAMILY COUNCIL.

NEITHER of the men spoke, nor could speak, but waited, in somewhat grim humour, the approach of the countess, which promised for them a new period of exceeding unpleasantness.

As she entered, Miss Vandeleur, addressing her, said, as if determined to leave them no loophole for escape, perhaps again to carry out their fell purpose,—

'Your sons were proposing a trip to France, and had not the gallantry to allow a lady to go with them, even though she condescended to ask.'

The countess gazed excitedly on the three faces in rapid succession, and saw

there confirmation of the frightful truth she hardly ventured to suspect before.

'And you?' she said inquiringly to Miss Vandeleur, hardly knowing what to say, or if it was safe to say anything.

Stephen saved Miss Vandeleur from answering, by himself saying with a smile,—

'Miss Vandeleur, mother, effectually convinced us we had better stay at home.'

The smile, and the seemingly light-hearted indifference with which Stephen treated the whole matter (but only in the hope to conceal its true character from his mother) impelled her to cast aside all pretences, and to exclaim,—

'Ah, heaven! I understand. But for this brave girl you would now have been moving swiftly to the work of mutual slaughter! Deny it if you can!'

There was no such denial forthcoming; and after a pause the countess again spoke with an extraordinary change of manner,—

'But it is no time to dwell on the offences of others when the acknowledgment of our

own is justly due. In my overweening desire to keep secret a matter seriously affecting the honour of the family, I failed to see how you, its chief members, might all be compromised. Before God and man I beg pardon of all!'

'Mother!' said Stephen, 'my very dear mother, is this necessary?'

'I ask the same question,' said the earl, 'and with the deepest concern.'

'Judge from the story I have yet to tell.'

Turning to Lord Harlaxton, who still held the packet of papers in his hands, she said,—

'Do you know that it is your mother's testimony you hold there among the rest, and which includes mine?'

'My mother's!' echoed Lord Harlaxton, in the greatest astonishment. 'Are you then not my mother?'

'You have often in childhood heard me speak of a dear sister, of her extraordinary beauty, and premature death soon after her marriage. Twelve months before that event I was called to her in the dead of night. I found her in a state more awful

than I can even now venture to recall, much less to describe. Bit by bit I got from her the sad details. She had been seduced under a solemn promise of marriage; knowing the truth of her lover's statement, that he would be disinherited if he married her before the death of the rich invalid to whom he was heir.

'In one and the same day she discovered the death of the invalid some weeks before; the marriage of her lover to another woman; and that she herself was destined to bring into the world an evidence of what she felt to be her shame.

'It was then she sent for me. I arrived just in time to prevent her suicide or insanity, by pledging myself—a childless woman—to receive the babe at birth as my own, my husband's prolonged absence abroad giving the opportunity.

'And so it was. And the kindly doctor, who alone was in the secret, who had known and secretly loved her long before, and been rejected by her, eventually again

wooed and won her; but only to find her die, broken-hearted, in his arms, within three months of their bridal.'

In a voice half stifled with emotion, Lord Harlaxton said,—

'And the name of the man?'

'The hour for vengeance has passed away. He is dead. The good doctor has also followed. All the rest you know, or can easily gather for yourselves. Only remember this. I thought to injure no one by making my nephew my husband's heir; for he had no other lineal male heir —could have none. So I then supposed. And heavy has been my punishment for my error.

'Some years later Stephen was born, and the whole course and tenor of my hitherto happy life was changed. Since then, I have been engaged in one continued struggle to master or neutralise the tremendous agencies for evil I had unintentionally set going. I can struggle no longer. My hopes and plans have failed. I surrender them now to you. Allied in blood; dear both to me as sons, you can if you will make my dreams

true. I resign myself to my fate, if you will not!'

There was a pause full of deep significance for all, before anyone cared to break the silence.

The earl was the first to speak, his face and manner showing he felt to the full the momentous importance of what he was about to say.

'Stephen, take the papers, and with them my hand.'

'Not till I know how you mean to act,' responded Stephen.

'That is easy to decide,' said Lord Harlaxton, with an air that signified he at least had made up his mind.

'Pardon me,' continued Stephen. 'Take a few moments to reflect while I glance at one of these papers—my father's letter.' He selected the letter from the other papers in Lord Harlaxton's hand; while Lord Harlaxton went a little apart, as if to fulfil Stephen's wish.

Stephen read the letter slowly through, then going towards Lord Harlaxton, put it into his hand without speaking.

He also read it through, but still more

slowly and carefully, as weighing the force of every word and sentence.

When Stephen saw he had finished, he said,—

'That enumerates the documents, briefly describes their character, and affirms their truth.'

'Yes,' said the earl, with an almost imperceptible sigh. 'It is decisive.' And a second time he offered the papers to Stephen, who accepted them. Then he turned, and began to pace slowly to and fro, like one whose own business is thoroughly settled; and who in politeness waits merely for the others present.

He did not, therefore, hear when Stephen said to Miss Vandeleur,—

'Will you again take charge of these?'

She took the packet of papers offered, and at a sign from him they walked towards the sea-wall, spoke for a minute or two together in low tones, ending with her,—

'Very well.'

'Stephen,' said Lord Harlaxton, advancing, 'I have reflected. Miss Vandeleur, you are free!'

'Not unless you retain everything in the world you now possess,' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, with generous enthusiasm.

'Impossible,' responded the earl.

'What? Not if in your so doing, you find included the love and honour of Stephen and myself?' she persisted. 'Pray consider.'

'It cannot be.'

The countess could no longer be silent.

'Is it so, indeed?' she asked. 'Can you, Philip, looking upon me still as your mother, but a truer mother than you have yet known, refuse to give my last hours of life the consolation of a united family, with unblemished honour?'

'You press me hardly,' urged the earl, in deep emotion. 'My honour is also sacred to me. That bids me lay all down at Stephen's feet.'

'Who positively refuses to take it all up,' exclaimed Stephen. 'So what the deuce is to be done?'

That touch changed the tone of tragedy natural to the event in progress to one of comedy, as Stephen had intended. And then the earl seemed to feel not

merely his persistence shaken, but that it was rapidly assuming one of less dignity.

So after another brief but troubled pause, he said, but with so obvious a reluctance it was impossible to misconstrue his feeling,—

'If you will have it so, I see but one solution. And that Miss Vandeleur has made possible for me. I loved her, and now shall never marry.'

'That is too great a sacrifice,' exclaimed the countess.

'It must be made, nevertheless,' rejoined the earl. 'I consent only on that condition.'

At this moment Gentleman Jack appeared for a single instant, saw the assemblage, but instantly withdrew before any one noticed him.

'By-the-bye, Philip, how did you get the papers?' asked Stephen.

'From your servant,' was the reply.

'Oh! from my servant!' and with that expression of surprise Stephen proceeded to call in the bailiff, and to ask him,—

'Who made you believe Lord Harlaxton caused my arrest?'

'Who? Why, o' course, your servant,' said the bailiff.

'And did he aid you in arresting me?'

'He watched—and warned me when you was a-coming.'

'That will do,' and therewith the bailiff retired; and the new actor, who had been listening and preparing himself, appeared on the scene, Gentleman Jack.

Taking up the last question and answer, careless of the fact that he could only have heard them by being secretly a listener, he said with superb assurance,—

'I did make him so believe. But why? Only to save two precious lives from bloodshed, which I got frightened about, after I was obliged to give the papers to Lord Harlaxton.'

'I thought his story incredible,' interposed the earl, 'till he said he had taken the papers from the thief, and undertook to show them to me. Now, I perceive *he* was the thief — the only one!'

'Oh, of course!' said Gentleman Jack, 'just what I expected.'

'I saw this man in the corridor at the very time,' joined in Miss Vandeleur.

'Why not, madam?' asked Gentleman Jack. 'I told his lordship I saw you.'

'One more chance for a lie, Jack,' said Stephen, measuring him from head to foot, 'and that'll be your last. Why did you give them to Lord Harlaxton, and not to me?'

'Because I met him first, and I wanted to get rid of my responsibility, which alarmed me; the robber from whom I took them having escaped.'

Stephen turned from him to the earl to say in a stern voice,—

'A clear case. Lord Harlaxton, you are a magistrate. I charge this man with felony.'

'Anything more?' asked Gentleman Jack. Then looking round he said, 'Would any lady or gentleman like to add as a hint for the judge that a thumb-screw or the rack would be the right thing for me? Oh, but I am well rewarded! I tried

to do one really good thing in my lifetime, from a foolish feeling towards a friend, and he turns me into a thief—a felon! I did use to make a little free with the truth, and then generally people believed. Now that I *do* tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, in the face of you all, and say I am innocent! you all treat me as a liar!'

'Hold your tongue, you rascal!' exclaimed Stephen, 'or it will be worse for you! Lord Harlaxton, I know it is a weakness I am about to reveal, but I withdraw my demand, and beg you to let him go.'

Lord Harlaxton bowed in silent acquiescence.

Then Stephen, turning to Gentleman Jack, cried,—

'Down on your knees!'

'I will, but only under protest, and to oblige you.' And he knelt.

'Go,' cried Stephen, seizing him by the collar, 'and take this with you!'

He was about to kick him, but Jack's ready wit came to his help in that extremity, seeing he was in no serious danger.

'Sir! sir!'

'What's the matter?' exclaimed Stephen.

'My new clothes, bought with my own money! If you will kick, let me first wipe the mud off your boots.'

This was irresistible. Stephen laughingly released him; and Gentleman Jack began coolly to put his clothes and himself to rights, preparatory to a very different, and more dignified departure, when a servant rushed in, greatly excited, to say,—

'Oh, my lord! oh, your ladyship! we have caught the thief with all the jewels on him, and he's now below in the servants' hall!'

'There! there! there!' cried Gentleman Jack, in a wonderful state of exultation, 'Truth, like murder, will out! Hurra!'

Presenting himself before Lord Harlaxton, he said,—

'Will your lordship be so good as to make out my committal?'

Lord Harlaxton, with a smile, said,—

'That, I suppose, is a hint as to how I have committed myself.'

Going next, with a very polite bow to Miss Vandeleur, Gentleman Jack said,—

'Perhaps so charming a young lady will another time find a more natural reason for a gentleman following where she leads the way; for I am, after all, no servant.'

She made him no answer other than by a smile.

He then went to Stephen, who was watching this scene with great enjoyment, and wondering how he, the great offender, was to be dealt with.

'Now, then, you may kick me!' said Gentleman Jack, with incomparable coolness, and enjoyable sense of humour.

'If either of us *ought* to be kicked, it may be that I am in the greater danger,' said Stephen; as he shook hands with Gentleman Jack in a very marked manner.

Feeling now the game was won, the latter recovered in an instant all his old buoyant audacity, but began with an apology,—

'I beg all here to pardon my rude, excited language.'

'All right, Jack, say no more!'

'Yes, a few words!' Then smiling, as with some happy thought, he said,—

'As I look round I am reminded of a great novelist's ideal. So I, too, bend in reverence To the GOOD!'—and he bowed to the countess, and to Lord Harlaxton; 'To the BEAUTIFUL!'—and Miss Vandeleur became for the moment the object of his adoration; and To the TRUE;—then looking round as if in a vain search, he placed the tips of the fingers of both hands on his own breast; and, amid the general laughter, he modestly retired into the background.

'Will you have a cigar?' said Stephen to the earl.

Lord Harlaxton took and lighted the cigar with a vesta from his own store, and handed the light to Stephen. Apparently he found it insufficient, so before it expired he took a letter from his pocket, looked at it as if to see it was of no importance, and then by its aid lighted the cigar. As he held it out, and watched the flame, he said,—

'I rather like burning paper, and watching the sparks die out; particularly when they say as now, So die the last vestiges of strife between us! Lord Harlaxton, there remains not a single proof against your absolute rights. Marry, or not marry, as you please. That burnt paper was my father's letter, the last of the packet. Miss Vandeleur has dropped all the other papers into the sea.'

Lord Harlaxton was now fairly overpowered. Tears were seen in his eyes, the first time for many a long year. When he could speak it was to say only,—

'Spare me words!'

'Can anybody tell me what has become of Miss Vandeleur?' suddenly exclaimed Stephen.

Lord Harlaxton turned to look for her. She had again retired towards the sea-wall with the countess. He went to her, took her trembling hand, his own exhibiting not much more of strength, and led her to Stephen.

'There is but one thing in the world that can match or surpass your gift to me. Unhappily, I do not know that I have

any claim even to present that to you, but—'

'I, at least, will never challenge that right, my dear lord!' responded Miss Vandeleur, in great agitation.

'And as to me—' began Stephen, as he glanced a little maliciously at Miss Vandeleur, 'But there's the bailiff waiting outside, ogling me, while I am considering the alternatives—you or he—prison in either case!'

'Ay,' said Miss Vandeleur, a delicious smile illumining her whole countenance, 'but captivity is brief there—eternal here. So think well, whilst there's time.'

'Since Peter no longer wants to be robbed, and there's nobody else to pay Paul, I don't see that I have much choice,' responded Stephen; 'but, however—' and there words ceased, for the lovers were in each other's arms, and the kiss forbidden so long before was now given.

'Mother,' said Stephen, when he could again think of anything else in this world, 'your plan has triumphed. We shall today crown you—not with laurel, but with

orange blossoms—for a new kind of bridal —the—'

But Miss Vandeleur, fearing perhaps some satirical hit in the old fashion at her expense, placed her fingers on his lips, to intimate she must have the last words in—

'The marriage of the family.'

THE END.

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